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Far Toward the Bottom

Megan Nicole Kruse
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FAR TOWARD THE BOTTOM

Megan Nicole Kruse

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To Rachel Slade,

my biggest fan and dearest friend throughout these two years.

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FAR TOWARD THE BOTTOM

He parked the truck on Marine Drive. The engine was making a ticking noise; when he put it in park it thumped in a way that made his stomach hurt. Karen didn't notice or if she did she was fed up on worrying.

"You bring the blankets?" Karen asked. Her bangs were brushed to one side and pinned with a barrette. It made her look like she was about five years old. That made his stomach hurt more but he nodded and got out of the car. The flashlight batteries were going out.

The air smelled like the slough, shit and old fish. "Christ," he said.

The blankets were folded under a tarp in the bed of the pickup; when he picked them up the wool scratched his arms. They picked their way over the damp ground to the trailer and he kicked the stuck door until it opened.

The trailer was a gift from Shep. He was full of gifts like that. *Listen, Chuck, I've got this credit card, it has about thirty dollars on it, use it, get yourself some groceries or something. Sign it illegible and then you just throw it away.* The trailer was just this side of condemned. *It's not pretty, Chuck, but it's just sitting there empty. Seems like a shame.* Someone had dropped it out there, up from the Rez housing, in a thick of trees. It smelled like mildew but there was a bed and no one came around. He and Karen could fuck all night if they wanted to. There was no chance of that in Karen's mother's house or the house where he lived with his father.

"Pretty soon we won't ever have to come back here again," Karen said. She swept the weak flashlight beam over the rusted-out range. There were rags stuffed into the windows where they had started to pull out of their frames. "You know that?" Her coat was zipped all the way to her chin. She smiled at him.

A fist in his stomach, he thought, a big fist squeezing.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked. "You look like something's wrong."

Karen was twenty, just turned. She was going to school to be a surgical tech. Ten credits left, and then she could get a job, make good money handing surgeons their knives and cleaning up afterward. The plan—now the word sounded silly to him, because what did that mean, anyway—was for them to move in together, get an apartment.

She spread the blankets out and lay down. She was wrapped up in that coat and she lay flat on her back and held her arms out to him. "God, come over here," she said. "Come warm me up."

He lay down beside her and she pushed her way up against his chest. She put her cold hands in his armpits and shivered.

"Karen," he said.

"What is it?" she asked, alarmed. "What is it?"

Her hair smelled good, like girl shampoo. It was so dark outside, and cold.

"Nothing," he said. He kissed her forehead, near that little-kid barrette. "I'm happy, is all."

Straight up; six line; square. Split 14-17; street. The croupier would spin the wheel and send the ball skittering in the opposite direction.

Every time, he was sure that his heart had stopped beating.

He was sixteen the first time he went through the casino doors and of course no one stopped him. Hair shaved close, the tattoos on his forearms. He didn't smile. Didn't smile, didn't look nervous, just 25 on 14 straight up.

He'd lost it. Lost it and walked back out and driven home. It was just twenty-five dollars. He hadn't expected to win anything. It was just something to do.

Everyone in Marysville went to the casino. Another old railway town, strung alongside the tracks, halfway between Seattle and the Canadian border. There were strawberries painted on the streets for the festival every June. When he was three or four, before his mother left, she dressed him up for the Strawberry Parade. She sewed him a costume on her rattling Singer—*the Strawberry Prince*, she said. His crown was made of cardboard with red felt strawberries hanging from it.

They lived up on Firetrail Hill, on ten acres of Rez land that they'd bought for cheap thirty years ago. The Tulalips weren't an original tribe—just a grouping of all the Indians who used to live in the drainages of river and on the islands, who fished from Vashon to Canada. *Tulalip*—it meant "far toward the bottom," to remind the canoes to cut a wide berth around the sandbar on the south of the bay.

He knew every stump that was pulled out when the land was cleared, every ownerless dog; the men on the Crabapple lakeshore mumbling, the smell of the dock when the crabs were pulled in. On Firetrail Hill, people said that an old Indian would run beside your car and reach into the windows, try to catch you in the dark. The year that

his mother left he lost his shoes at the pow-wow and walked home barefoot, dragging pieces of driftwood from the shore. His mother was out the door when he was five but his father would never leave, he thought. Would be there for the rest of his goddamn life.

He was ready to get out. The house was too small for two, if you could believe that. Mostly he wanted to be able to see Karen. She lived with her mother, who didn't like him, and there wasn't room at his father's house. He wanted to lie down next to her, fuck her when he wanted, buy curtains and put in flooring and have people over. Do right by her, is what Shep would say.

That was the point, that's why he'd done it. They had twelve hundred saved up for the deposit and first month's rent on an apartment out in Skagit County. They were supposed to meet the landlord in two days. But he wanted it to be better than just that. Wanted for Karen to be able to pick out furniture, new clothes, groceries, without worrying about how much it was going to cost.

When the ball rattled its way around the wheel and stopped he thought, for a moment, that if he just explained, then they would let him take it back, that it would all be fine, that he could take back his money and go on home.

Karen had a little flask of whiskey. She sat up and brought it out of her pocket, unscrewed the top and took a long drink.

"Kiss me, Chuck," she said.

It was too cold in the trailer to do much. They kissed for a while, then lay still. She fell asleep with her head on his chest. He could hear the Sound outside, the waves slapping the beach. He used to watch the boys in the canoe races down there, putting in

on the black-pebbled shore, their heads sunk in their upside-down canoes. Karen was snoring a little. He thought he would never fall asleep but he must have, because when he opened his eyes it was early morning. He pulled her closer and smelled the back of her neck and her damp, fine hair. For a second he forgot what had happened, and everything was okay again. It was almost worse, he thought, to have to realize a second time.

He lay in the gray half-light. The wallpaper had long stains that looked like countries he hadn't paid attention to in high school. Termites had bored holes in the baseboards and left tiny mountains of sawdust, but it wasn't bad. They would come out to the trailer two or three nights a week. He watched the light through the ratty curtains get brighter and brighter. He needed to get going, he thought. He turned on his side and hoped Karen would wake up. She made a small noise in her sleep. Her barrette had slipped down and her hair was in her face.

He would go, he thought, as soon as she woke up. He would go home, call Shep, borrow twenty or thirty dollars, then he'd go to the casino. He could turn twenty into twelve hundred in a few hours, he'd done it before.

The old casino had been small and dark, a wooden shack, really, next door to the liquor store. An old man sat outside most days with a plastic bottle of Potter's and for a five dollar tip he'd buy Chuck whatever he asked for. The new casino had gone up last year. Glass and tile, a gift shop with fake Navajo and Cherokee heirlooms, buffalo hides even though the Tulalips were a fishing tribe. Outside silver fins curved up on either side of the entrance. It was open twenty-four hours a day, full of old men palming dice and

women pulling the handles on the slots. And the roulette wheels, he thought. His stomach was a mess. He needed Karen to wake up. He turned again, pushed her a little.

She opened her eyes and looked at him and smiled. It could kill him, that smile. "Hey, kid," he said. "I've got to get going." He tried to smile back at her.

He had her at her mother's house in Arlington within the hour. The fields were dry and yellow, sparse grass stretching out toward the landing strip at the airport. He lit a cigarette and turned up toward Firetrail.

His father had worked an early shift at the hospital and wouldn't be home for another two hours. He parked on the grass outside the house. The yard was ravished by moles, staggering in small hills and ditches. It was littered with the remains of a half dozen structures—a duck pen, a rabbit hutch, a tool shed, stacks of firewood, the barbed wire of a fallen fence. The pasture was growing into the rest of the yard. Once, five years after the ducks had been sold, he found an egg half-buried in the dirt, nearly turned to stone.

He didn't go into the house, just sat in the front of the car and put his head against the steering wheel. He felt like his body with filling with something thick and heavy, like he was choking on sand. A hundred things he could never say, things he wanted or remembered: strong bourbon. The inside wheel, the bets 27 to 1. The smell of his father's baseball cap, sweat and tobacco; his mother's perfume in the Dodge on the way to Port Angeles. And darker, mustier-smelling things, regrets and promises.

He had the vaguest memories of his mother. Her pale yellow hair, and a silver ring, and the song she used to sing to him—*The gypsy rover came over the hills, along*

the valleys so shady. He whistled and he sang til the green woods rang, and he won the heart of a lady.

When she left his father had helped him brush his teeth, put him into his pajamas. Told him stories. About men who saved their kind women, who fought for their honor. The fist squeezed his stomach.

He used to play games with his father on car trips. *When you get rich Chuck you'll buy me a car? When you're rich and famous you'll still come home to see me? If you had a million bucks what would you spend it on?* Chuck would promise him everything, a thousand worthless and beautiful things. His father hid money, in bottles behind the spray paint, the empty oil cans, the old rags curled like limp white hands in the garage. He folded fives into the breast pocket of his wedding suit, into his shoes. He didn't trust the banks. When Chuck was four or five and playing in the closets he would sometimes slip his hand into a coat pocket and find a roll of bills. He thought of each tiny secret fortune like he thought of the powdered milk that transformed beneath the faucet, or the way the Sound seemed to burn at dusk—just another enchantment, an ordinary mystery.

He went in to the house and picked up the phone.

"Shep," he said. "I need to borrow some money."

Shep was his best friend. He was half Indian; his short, dark mother had married a white man with glasses and a soft stomach, and they'd had Shep—six and a half feet tall, broad-shouldered, skin pebbled as the shoreline off Marine Drive.

"You know I would," he said. "You know I would."

"Please," Chuck said.

"Chuck," he said. "You're going to take it down there and you're going to lose it. You want me to tell you what you owe me already?"

Shep sold car parts, and he took bets. He had a deal with someone over at marine moorage that gave him a good cut. Marine moorage had been the biggest money for the Tribes before the casino went up.

"Chuck," he said. "You go and you get yourself somebody to talk to, and then you go and get yourself a job. Until then you're going to have to find somebody else to call."

"Shep," he said. "I lost some money of Karen's. I need to get it back. She's going to be torn up if I don't. I just need thirty bucks and I'll get it all back."

"You just tell her," Shep said. "That you lost it. And then while you're at it you can tell her that you owe me about a grand, and I'm guessing I'm not the only one."

The phone clicked and there was a long silence before the disconnect tone kicked in. Shep wasn't going to help him. He crouched down by the phone. Without Shep on his side—he took a deep breath, tried to concentrate on the wall, on a knot in the wood paneling. He didn't want to move at all—like if he could just stay still, time would slow down, too.

He couldn't just tell Karen. There was something else that had happened, six months ago, when her grandmother had given her six hundred dollars. She wanted to buy a little white Saab that needed a new carburetor. He'd talked her into putting four hundred of it straight up on the outside wheel—it was easier on the outside, he'd said, and if she had a little more she'd be able to fix the carburetor. She didn't want to, but it

bothered him—she had six hundred, but she could make double that, or triple. It was a shame, he thought, to have that much money and not use it, not make something more of it.

When it was gone, she looked at him. She looked confused. Not sad, or angry, confused. He couldn't get that look out of his head. He thought it would have been better, if she had been angry. They hadn't spoken about it after that.

When he was young, six or seven, he kept a drawer in a bureau filled with salt and pepper shakers, scarves, ceramic figurines—a tiny, useless inheritance secreted away in the bottom drawer of his pressboard dresser. He would take them out one by one, hold them, return them to the drawer. As though they could conspire to give him meaning, a small religion, something important built of smaller things. And now, he thought, it was all running like water, right through his hands.

He must have sat on the floor by the telephone for a while. He heard the car pull up, his father's footsteps on the rotting porch. They'd been talking about rebuilding that porch for years—it was just wet dark wood now. Last spring his father put his foot through one of the boards and sank down into the loam below.

Chuck stood up and went to his bedroom in the back. He lay down on the bed. He needed to think. He just needed a little bit of money, and then he could fix everything. He thought of his father's wedding suit, the pockets lined with brown satin. There was three hundred dollars in the right front pocket—the last, he was sure, of what his father had hidden away. He hadn't wanted to touch it. It seemed unlucky to take the

last of it. But—he pushed back a wave of panic, stood, went down the hall to his father's closet—there wasn't a choice, now.

He could hear his father in the kitchen, the water turning on and off, the dishes clattering in the rack. The closet smelled like wool and mothballs. He pushed his way in and things fell from the hangers. He slipped his hand into the pocket of the wedding jacket and for a moment he felt only the satin lining. How many times had he reached in and felt it? The money was never really hidden. It was right there, in a suit pocket, or wedged into the toes of his shoes. Coins in the empty cans of chewing tobacco. Everywhere.

The money made him angry, at first, and so he had felt fine when he first started borrowing the little caches. All of that money. *What if the house burned,* he wanted to say. *What if you forget where you put it?* He remembered a new bike he'd wanted on his tenth birthday; *We can't afford it,* his father had said. And all of that money, strung through the closet like so much jewelry, like water he wasn't supposed to drink.

He'd been keeping a list of what he'd taken, so that he could replace it. A careful notation: *Left black loafer, toe, $55 in fives. Mom's wool jacket, left pocket, $32, three tens and two ones.* If he looked at the list long enough he felt better. He would be able to reconstruct everything, he thought. It would be as if it had never happened at all.

In the kitchen his father was drying his hands on a dishtowel. There was water on to boil, a cellophane package of pasta on the counter. "Chuck," he said, "You going to be around for dinner? You want to ask Karen over?"

Karen. She was at home now, he thought, and her mother was watching television, and she was looking at catalogues, thinking about things to put in their house. Thinking about what kind of place they could get with a twelve hundred dollar deposit. She'd never wanted anything so big from him, he thought. Nothing really that big at all.

"Nah," Chuck said.

"You must be pretty excited about the big move."

He nodded, then picked up his jacket off the back of a chair. "I won't be home for dinner," he said. "I'm going to Shep's." He put the jacket on, felt again for the roll of money in his pants pocket. His heart was beating hard in his chest.

"You drive careful."

"I do," he said.

The air was cold and smelled of woodsmoke. He felt better. The money in his pocket—it was a stupid superstition, he thought. History was full of people making it back from the edge of something. He lit a cigarette. The tires kicked up gravel and the dust lit red in his brakelights.

He thought that once he'd replaced the twelve hundred, and put back his father's money, he would pay Shep. He wanted things between them to be right again. From the top of Firetrail Hill he could see the city spread out, a bowl of lights in the dark valley. A sad place, he thought, but a beautiful one. When he and Karen left, if they moved far, he would come back to visit. Or write letters—his mother had never once sent a letter, or called. The summer that she left his father had sat by his bed for hours every night,

telling him stories. Long into the dark, the words lapped against him. Slowly his want for his mother ebbed away, the tightness in his throat faded.

He could see the casino, the silver fins arcing above the treeline. The cars in the lot looked tiny and the asphalt was bright beneath the halogen lights. He walked to the door, feeling for the little roll of bills.

He thought of Karen, how she looked stretched out across the mattress in the trailer, her body bare and silvered. Right now she had probably put down the catalogues, he thought, and was sitting on the sofa with her legs curled underneath her, the television flickering a yellow-blue light. Up on the hill he imagined his father, standing over the pot of boiling water while the kitchen windows fogged.

Chuck walked to the first roulette wheel and sat down. He had a hopeful feeling, the way he used to have. The first time he ever won, he took Karen to a motel in town. The money hadn't meant anything then—he'd put five bucks on the inside, and when he won he'd collected his chips, cashed them in, and gone straight to pick up Karen. She thought he was taking her to the trailer; she'd filled her purse with votive candles that left waxy shadows on the leather. In the motel parking lot she kissed him, climbed half into his lap. She smiled at him in a way that made his chest ache; he didn't want it to ever stop.

They stood under the shower together. He washed her hair with one of the little bottles of motel shampoo; they dressed up and went to dinner down the street. Back at the room Karen pulled her dress over her head and they danced a little, laughing, before she pulled him down on the bed. He had a job then, checking groceries, and so the winnings for a while were just that—something fun, something to make Karen smile. He

wasn't saving anything but he could pay his way. He bought groceries for his dad, took Karen to breakfast sometimes. But he'd been late too many times. Something stupid. He'd taken his last paycheck, put it all on one bet and won big.

Now it'd been six months. Enough time to lose all that money plus Shep's, enough to empty every pocket in his father's closet. He knew his father had noticed. It was just easier, he thought, to pretend. The casino was bright, with no clocks on the walls. It could be any time. He hated it here now. He put his head down on the roulette table and the croupier looked at him. "You here to play?" he said. "Or just to sleep on my table?"

Chuck started to get up. It was useless, he thought. There was still time to go home, to call it off. He stood up. There was a girl who looked like Karen sitting at one of the slot machines. She was older, but she had the same round face. She looked over at him and smiled.

Chuck looked back at the croupier. "I'll play," he said. He put his money down on the inside wheel, straight up.

The lights in the casino were too bright; the wheel clicked fast, slow, fell. And just like that, it was gone.

He couldn't stand the thought of seeing his father so he stayed all night outside the casino, in the car with the heater turned on him. The gas gauge dipped slowly toward empty. He was supposed to meet Karen downtown in the morning, in front of Don's Restaurant. Her mother was going to drop her off and then he would pick her up, and they would go to put the deposit down on the apartment.

He turned the car off and on all night, opened the door once when he thought he was going to be sick. He watched people leaving the casino, going to their cars. He nodded off in the early morning; when he woke again it was nearly ten. He turned the car back on, drove over to Don's.

He pulled in the back entrance, parked, and walked toward the front, careful to stay close to the building. Karen was standing outside the front door, wearing a little jean skirt, holding her green leather purse. She looked happy. He watched her stand in the parking lot, looking around. He hated himself. There was a kid at the back of the lot and he jogged over to him.

"Listen," Chuck said. "Around the front there's a girl in a jean skirt. She's got a white top on and a little green purse. In twenty minutes you go over there and give her these keys. Tell her the car's in the lot and it's hers."

The kid looked at the keys. He hesitated. "What's in it for me?"

"Please, man," Chuck said. He held one hand to his stomach. He was afraid he might puke.

"Buy me beer," the kid said. He gestured at the liquor store down the street. "I got cash. You buy me beer."

"Fine," Chuck said. The kid picked through is pockets, came up with a ten, handed it to Chuck. Chuck went into the store, grabbed a case of Bud, paid for it. He thought of how the clerk must see him—another customer, a guy buying beer. It seemed unfair that there was no one to tell when everything was so completely gone. That Karen didn't know that she would stand in that parking lot all afternoon, looking out at nothing, scuffing her shoes on the pavement. It was all laid out in front of her and she didn't

know it. The afternoon when his mother left he'd just kept running a truck across the carpet while it got dark, while his father went again and again to the window. Their old life had slipped away completely, long before they noticed.

He gave the beer and the change to the kid, handed him the keys, and started walking north. He tried not to think of Karen, standing there, so hopeful.

He walked toward Crabapple Lake, away from the freeway. He didn't know where to go. He thought about the trailer but the Shep would find him. He could see Firetrail Hill, imagined his father up there, worrying, hoping that Chuck had stayed the night at Shep's or with Karen. He walked and looked at nothing.

It must have been two or three in the morning when a car pulled up in front of him. It stopped quickly and someone came toward him in the dark. He raised his hands up toward his face.

Shep grabbed him by the arm and shook him. "You fuck," he said. "You worthless fuck."

There was someone behind him. Karen. Her face like a faint moon. Chuck couldn't look at her.

"Let me be," Chuck said. He pulled his arm back.

Chuck swung at him, but dropped his arm before he could connect. Shep was big; he didn't even want to fight him.

"I'm taking you home," Shep said.

"Karen…" he started to say. He felt tired. He couldn't make out her expression in the dark.

"Get in the car," Shep said.

The inside of the car was warm, glowing and faint. Chuck climbed into the backseat and leaned his cheek against the window and looked out, even though it was black, just the long, dark night. Once he started to reach forward to touch Karen's shoulder, but she stared straight ahead and he put his hands back in his lap.

Shep pulled the car up to the house, got out and shut the door. "Karen—" Chuck leaned forward in his seat. He could feel how she was gone from him, and it made him feel like he couldn't breathe. "Karen—I wanted to make things better for us," he said. He knew, though, that it wasn't true. He didn't know what the truth was, but he heard himself say it and he knew. "I wanted to make things better," he said again. He felt ugly.

"It's done," she said. She didn't mean the money. She didn't tell him to get out of the car but he did anyway, and followed Shep up onto the rotting porch. Chuck looked out at the woods. Just beyond those trees the road stretched out empty. There was nowhere in the world to go.

Shep knocked on the door, even though Chuck had a key. His father answered it right away, as though he'd been waiting. He was wearing his pajamas and his hair was standing up; his eyes were red and sleepless. "What's happened?" he asked. He stood back from the door.

Chuck went past him, walked down the dark hall to his bedroom. He could hear Shep talking to his father; the words were low. It didn't matter, he thought. Everything was gone. It was done.

He went into his room and turned out the light. It seemed like a long time before he heard Shep's car pull away. The red glow of the brakelights against the wall of his room, then only the dark.

He heard his father come in, felt his weight on the edge of the bed.

"Karen's gone," Chuck said. "It's over." His voice cracked. It was quiet for a long time. "I took it all," Chuck said finally. "Even the wedding suit."

His father just sat there, in the dark. He didn't look at Chuck, but at the opposite wall.

It had been years, since his father had sat there like this. Neither of them spoke. All those heroes, Chuck thought, and their waiting, beautiful lives.

"I'm sorry," he said. He held his breath.

The crooked crown his mother had sewn; a pair of shoes with money stuffed into the toe; his father's hands folded in his lap in the dark; "I know," his father said. It wasn't kind, or angry. Just the words.

"You can go to bed," Chuck said. "And I promise I'll be out in the morning."

His father didn't say anything, but he didn't leave.

Chuck closed his eyes and kept them closed until there was only the dark and the warmth of the house. His father didn't move. Chuck didn't open his eyes. It's done, he thought. He had the feeling he used to have when it was still early, and the stories were far from over, and he wasn't at all afraid.

BUNNY

All the way home from the cancer center they were quiet. Kit turned the radio on, then off; Lena turned it on again. There was a stoplight at the bottom of the hill that led up to the property and they sat there for three or four minutes, even though on every side it was just dark woods. The light turned green. On the telephone poles along the road, cardboard signs floated in the dark. *Firewood cheap, Seamstress 4 Hire, Repairs All Kinds.*

Lena reached over and took Kit's hand. "We should celebrate," she said. Kit had had her first normal blood draw after the treatment for her ovarian cancer. One of the nurses had given her two pink pillows, meant to be ovaries, for the occasion.

"Maybe," Kit said. She held the pillows in her lap. They reminded Lena of new kittens.

It wasn't really over. The first blood draw had been normal, but in six weeks they would draw blood again, and then six weeks after that. The months would move forward that way, a daisy chain of small perils.

Lena parked the car in the twin ruts outside the house. "What a day," Kit said. She walked inside slowly, leaning on the sagging porch rail. Lena followed her in. She waited for Kit to say something but Kit just went down the hall to bed.

Two hours later Lena heard it through the storm windows, a sound like a child wailing. She had been sitting at the kitchen table, drinking and watching her own reflection in the glass while Kit slept in the back room. An ugly face, she thought, and

then the sound came. She held still. Her own flat eyes stared back at her. The sound came again.

She stood near the door, listening. A raccoon, she thought, and now the trash will be tipped over. When she opened the door the sound stopped.

The rain was knifing the grass. It dripped from the gutters; the porch light was a dim half-circle that faded into the dark lawn. Near the woodshed she heard it again, a tiny wail.

"Who's there?" she called.

The noise got louder. Someone was crying in the woodshed. Lena held her breath. Her heart slammed in her chest. "Come out," she said quietly. Her eyes began to adjust to the dark; she could make out the square of the woodshed, the broken shingle that hung from the corner. "Come out, right now!" she said.

The girl stepped into the dim sodium light. Lena jumped, startled, and then the fear began to rush out of her. She wanted to laugh.

The girl couldn't have been older than seven. Her little red shorts and striped t-shirt were soaked; the shirt was so stretched that Lena could see one side of her chest, her pale flat nipple. Her blonde hair was snarled and hung wet in her face. Her head was down.

For a moment the relief left her breathless and Lena felt disoriented. The empty glass was in her hand. The girl stood still in the porch light.

"Hey," Lena said, crouching down. "Hey, there." She reached out one hand and touched the girl's skinny arm. The girl didn't look up, but she whimpered louder. "Hey," Lena said. "You're okay now. You're okay."

She pulled the girl gently toward her; she reached to push the hair away from her eyes. "Hey there—you must be so cold—" Beneath the mat of blonde hair, the bruise was the color and size of a plum.

Lena let the hair drop. The unsteady feeling came back; for a minute she thought that the eye was gone altogether.

"You're okay," she said, quickly. "You're okay." She turned back to the house. She didn't want Kit to wake up. She turned to the girl. "Come here," she said, "You're okay, honey." Lena reached down and lifted the girl into her arms and carried her into the kitchen.

She was so cold, Lena thought. She carried her to the laundry room, found a towel, "You're okay," she kept saying, mostly for herself; she was afraid. The girl had stopped crying; her thin arms were looped and shaking around Lena's neck.

There was something familiar about her; Lena had a vague memory of the girl on the gravel road that cut between their property and the back forty, pale in the blackberries. She and Kit owned a five acre plot of gnarled tree roots and underbrush. The plot was hemmed by forty steep acres that sloped down toward farmland on the opposite side and seemed to belong to no one. Because it was untended, there were occasionally families who set up camp there, picking chanterelles or just waiting out hard luck. They sank trailers into the loam and their trucks made deep ruts through the woods that filled with rainwater and dark leaves.

"Lena?" Kit called. Lena could hear her padding slowly down the hall. All through the chemo her feet had hurt her; *It feels like I'm walking on stones,* she would

say. *I can hardly stand it.* That was the biggest change, besides her new hair—they could walk places again.

"It's nothing!" Lena called. "Go back to bed." Lena wrapped the towel around the girl and carried her back to the kitchen.

"Jesus Christ." Kit was in her underwear. "Nothing?" Lena worried for a second that she would scare the girl. She was still so thin; there was a hatch of scars in the crook of each elbow, and her eyebrows were still bald, pale peaks. The girl said nothing.

"She came out of the woods," Lena said. "She's got a black eye—" The girl sank into Lena, tightening the cold knot of her arms.

"I'll call the police," Kit said.

"No," Lena said. "No—It's dark. She's scared and exhausted. I want to keep her until morning."

"What if her parents are looking for her?" Kit asked.

Lena felt a stab of annoyance. "Her parents probably *are* looking for her. But I don't think we should do them any favors." The girl's hands were grabbing her shirt. "I want her to be safe for one night," she said. "What does it matter if we keep her until morning?"

Kit paused. She looked at the empty glass on the table. "Lena," she said.

"Get me that stool," Lena said. She set the girl down on it and wrapped the towel around her, patted at the mat of blonde hair, careful not to touch the swollen left side of her face.

Kit sat in one of the kitchen chairs. "Can you talk, honey?" she asked. "Can you tell us what happened?" The girl said nothing.

"Kit—go back to bed," Lena said. "I'll give her a bath. She can sleep on the couch."

Kit crossed her arms over the front of her thin t-shirt. The elastic of her underwear was frayed. Nine months ago, Lena had found her curled on the bathmat. An ambulance; there was fluid and blood in her abdomen; the surgeon went in. Lena paced the waiting room, eating sherbet she couldn't taste from a paper cup. They'd been able to save part of her uterus and a piece of the left ovary. The scar was small. It bothered Lena, that you could have such little evidence. That things could change so irrevocably, and still the house stood, a stray dog ran in and out of the woods, things went on and on.

"She can't stay here," Kit said. "Someone needs to know where she is."

"Like *who?*" Lena snapped. "That sounds like a great idea, to tell *someone* where she is."

"Lena—" Kit looked from the girl to Lena and back again.

"Will you let me handle this?" Lena asked. "Okay? Will you do that?" She kept one hand on the girl's small shoulder. She wanted badly for Kit to leave the room.

Kit picked up the phone. Lena stood up and put her hand over Kit's. "If you go back to bed," Lena said. "I promise I'll call." *Just go,* she thought. *Please.*

"Don't lie to me, Lena."

It wasn't a lie, she thought. It wasn't that. The girl was touching the bruise with her fingers, carefully. Kit shook her head. "I'm too tired to fight," she said. She turned and went back to the bedroom.

When she had gone Lena lifted the girl up off the stool and carried her to the bathroom. She undressed her; the girl didn't resist, or say a word. There was another bruise, the size of a golf ball, on the left side of her rib cage.

When Lena lifted the girl into the tub she began to splash at the water with open palms, laughing. "I want bubbles," she said, and Lena felt a rush of relief to hear that she could speak.

"Bubbles, huh?" she said. She fumbled under the sink and found an ancient bottle of bubble bath. Lena poured the purple liquid into her cupped hands and held it under the running faucet so it rose in an iridescent tower. "Here," she said, and pulled the girl's palms forward in a cup. She poured another handful of soap. "You try."

The girl leaned forward and the soap bubbled up from her hands. She laughed. "What's your name, sweetheart?" Lena asked.

"Bunny," the girl said. "Bunny Bun." She looked up at Lena. Her hair was pushed off her face; the bruise swelled from her eyebrow to her cheekbone, making a half-moon of red and purple. "I want to go home," she said, but she put her hands back under the faucet.

"Did you run away, Bunny?" Lena asked. The girl stared intently at the bubbles. "Did you run away from home? Maybe somebody hit you?"

Bunny raised her shoulders, holding them rigid. She looked at Lena for a second, then away. "No," she said. Her voice was cold. It gave Lena a chill.

By the time Lena came to bed, Kit was asleep. She'd given Bunny a t-shirt to wear, put the dirty clothes in the laundry, and covered the sofa with a sheet. While

Bunny lay flat Lena floated blankets over her, letting them sink to cover her head. Bunny laughed; she seemed to forget the moment in the bathtub. Lena sat at the end of the sofa until Bunny was asleep, then went into the bedroom.

She tried but she couldn't sleep. Someone must be looking for the girl, she thought; and who was to say what would happen to her in the morning? She imagined a trailer camp shoehorned between maple trees, Bunny's toys flung into a tangle of salal.

She lay still, listening for Bunny, listening to Kit's breathing. When Kit was still having treatments, Lena would drop her off in the mornings at the Center and pick her back up in the afternoon. Kit would be sitting on a bench outside, wearing a knit cap from the basket the nurses kept at the front desk; tiny orange sunbursts on black wool, someone's good intention.

At the Center, Kit was a list of numbers—Category T1c, Grade 1, Stage 1C. Every two and a half weeks, Lena drove her to the center for a round of treatment. The room was filled with thirty recliners, thirty small televisions on stands that rotated. The nurse would weigh Kit, take her vitals, insert an IV. They gave her anti-anxiety medication, a steroid, Benadryl, something for the nausea, then eight hours of Taxol and Carboplatin. Lena had stayed once, but the time off of work was difficult; the payroll went out on Thursdays. The accounting assistant could maybe manage without her, she'd said, but Kit said, *No, just drop me off. Don't worry,* and Lena felt relieved. The people all looked like shadows. The color of some of the chemo drugs was a dark brown, like blood.

Kit kept trying to talk to her about the cancer. "I'm scared too, Lena," she'd say. "It's normal to feel this way." What way, Lena thought. Most nights now she sat in the

kitchen, staring in the mirror of the dark window, drinking until the room was just a soapy lens to squint through. One night, after Kit's hair had started to grow back, Lena took the orange starburst hat and unraveled it with a paring knife, cutting the threads, pulling it all loose until it was just a pile of tangled wool, a dark bird's nest on the empty kitchen table.

Lena woke up early the next morning and dressed in the dark. She walked quietly through the living room but Bunny didn't stir. She'd kicked the blankets down; the t-shirt was hiked up to her white underwear.

She left a note for Kit on the kitchen counter: *Her name is Bunny. I'll be back soon and I promise I'll take care of it. Love, L.* She put on her rubber boots and went out to the truck. People moved out to Skagit County to be criminals or paranoids or addicts in a place where that was normal, maybe even important. Kit and Lena were here because Ohio had started to feel like a dirty snowball. The winter salt corroding the bottom of their crappy Ford. Vermillion, the dirty shores of Lake Eerie. At the end of every Ohio summer a school of fish had washed up and rotted on the shore, a thousand silvery arrows pointing in a single direction. Skagit County had the cheapest land between Bellingham and Seattle, and Lena and Kit bought the house and the land quickly. On the phone to her mother in Cleveland Lena had said, *You've never seen so much green.* It turned out it was just a greener account of the same quiet desperation, burnt-out buildings, that factory smell.

There was an old logging road that ran up into the back forty and Lena drove it until it was too rutted and overgrown, then parked and started up the back forty. It was all

mud, held together with a skein of roots and somewhere, underneath, a crag of rock. The hill was gentle but the mud made it slick. Branches and wet leaves slapped her face; she imagined the girl, plummeting between trees, rock; the dark of the sky against the darker leaves above her. Her arms and legs had been a grid of fresh scratches by the time she reached the yard.

Lena climbed the hill slowly, lifting long arms of blackberry out of her way, stepping gingerly on loose rock. When people set up camp, they almost always pulled off the logging road that ran the top of the back forty. She expected that she would have to be methodical to find it, but then the slope evened out, a hundred feet before the logging road, and there it was.

What was left of the trailer was dark with mildew and soft with rain. Someone had built a tiny woodshed outside, but it had collapsed; one soft corner sagged to the mud. The rain beat steadily on the trailer roof.

Her heart was beating fast. She wished she'd thought to bring a knife. She wanted to pound on the door, but surely they would guess that she had Bunny. And then—she imagined sitting in the kitchen, weeks or months from now, looking out into those trees. Knowing that Bunny was up there. That she had done nothing to keep her safe. She walked carefully toward the back of the trailer instead. The windows had a skin of black mold. As quietly as she could, she looked inside.

It was dark but she could see that there was no one home. She felt a quick, sharp disappointment, then walked around to the door and stepped inside. The linoleum was coming up in ragged peaks. There was a propane stove propped on the counter, a few pots and pans stacked in the sink. On the counter a handful of noodles floated in

glutinous water. There was one bed to the left, framed with windows; it had been stripped of its bedding. The mattress was covered in a rubber sheet. The little dinette was missing one of its long cushions; the rest were laced with mildew.

On the bed was a coat, a Bunny-sized coat. One of the front pockets had been ripped off. She waited for a minute, trying to think. The rain dripped off the trees.

By the time she got back to the house Kit was awake. On Tuesdays she went to work at the county building. Lena kicked off the rubber boots and left them in the laundry room. Bunny was at the table, eating a bowl of cereal.

"Hi, Bunny," Lena said.

Bunny squinted at her. "It's breakfast," she said.

"Listen," Kit said. "I have to get going. I'll see you this afternoon?" She put one hand on Bunny's head, brushed her hair behind her little ear. "Bunny, you be good, okay? I'll be seeing you." She looked at Lena. "Listen," she said. "What's the plan?"

"I'm going to call the police." Lena reached up and put a hand against Kit's cheek. "I'm going to call them right now."

Kit smiled. "I love you," she said.

Bunny lifted a Cheerio with her spoon and let it drop again. She frowned. "I hate milk," she said.

When Kit's car pulled away Lena paged through the phone book until she found the number for the child welfare line. No police, she thought. The police in this part of the county were boys from the high school who drank too much and slugged their wives.

"Child welfare hotline," a woman said. "Are you calling to make a report?" Her voice was gravel rolling in a tin can.

"I have my neighbor's child," Lena said. "And the neighbors are gone."

"Do you have a relationship with the family?" the woman asked. She rattled a cough into the line.

Lena paused. "Yes," she said. "I do. But I'm not sure that they're coming back."

"We can take her to the holding center until we find the family," the woman said.

"Actually," Lena said. "The woman is a relative of mine. I have a pretty good idea that she'll be back."

"We'll need to check the runaway list."

"What happens if she's on the list?" Lena asked. Fists, she thought. Broken windows; the head ripped from a plastic doll; bottles; all the ordinary specters.

"They'll do an investigation, ma'am," she said. "They're trained to investigate." There was a tight feeling in the back of Lena's throat. Yes, she thought, and trained to know when it was easier just to let a kid slip back to her parents, to save on the court costs and foster care and the whole elaborate hazard.

"Well, let me just call you right back," Lena said.

"I'll need the child's name, ma'am," the woman said.

"Just a minute," Lena said. She hung up the phone.

Bunny sat quietly at the kitchen table. She'd opened a box of crackers and spread six or seven of them on the table. She picked up each one carefully, licked the salt off of it, and set it back down. The crackers were dark with spit. She rolled one like a wheel. "I want more," she announced. Her hair fell forward over her black eye.

"Bunny," Lena said. "Let's go do something."

All the way to Burlington, Bunny sat in the front seat of the truck with her back straight and her hands folded in her lap.

"Where do you want to go?" Lena asked. Bunny shrugged. "Maybe we should get you some warm clothes." Bunny shrugged again.

At a strip mall she bought Bunny a winter coat, pants, sweaters. Bunny tried everything on solemnly, like she was doing a job. On the way out of the store they passed a card table covered with printed index cards. There was a ballot box on top of it for surveys: *How clean was the store today? Were you greeted by your cashier?* "Is it a contest?" Bunny asked.

"No," Lena said. "It's just a survey, to see if the store was good or not."

"It was good," Bunny said. She nodded. She was holding a little rubber coin purse. Lena looked at it. It was bright green. "Bunny," Lena said. "Where did you get that?" Bunny had her little red shorts on again. Lena had taken them out of the dryer that morning. There had been nothing in the pockets, last night or today. "Is that yours?"

Bunny squeezed it and it opened like a mouth. A twenty fell out into her hand. "Can I see?" Lena asked.

"It's *mine,"* Bunny said. She held the twenty tight in her hand. "I won it in a contest. A contest for going to Disneyland. I was second." She rubbed the bill against her cheek. "Second is still pretty good," she said. She followed Lena back to the truck.

Bunny was quiet the rest of the way home. They watched the low gray buildings of Burlington flatten out into farmland. Where would a little girl have gotten twenty

dollars? Rows of rotting winter corn flipped past. It occurred to Lena that Bunny might have planned to run—that even at five or six or seven you might know when it was time to change your life.

Bunny was holding her twenty up in front of her, admiring it. "Second *is* really good," Lena said. Bunny leaned back in the seat and tried to reach her feet up to the dashboard. She touched the toe of her sneaker to the glovebox and then kicked it back down.

The move to Skagit County had been the only time that Lena had changed anything. She thought, at the time, that to do that with someone—to drive your pickup away from what was left of Ohio—meant that you would want each other badly and forever, and in the same amounts. It still seemed fair, that it wasn't that way. The first two years in Skagit County Lena had been so happy to be in their new damp house, that palace of silverfish. So happy, just to be with Kit, who would have been happy to leave, who didn't seem to care much either way. At parties she would sometimes leave the room to see if Kit would follow her but Kit never did. A stupid thing, but she remembered it. It made her feel like a fool. The wanting had spilled out of her slowly, like a balloon deflating.

"Bunny," Lena said. "What if I took you to Disneyland sometime?"

"You lie," Bunny said.

"No," said Lena.

At a party last summer, after two bottles of wine, she fucked the host in the laundry room. A dryer sheet stuck to the leg of her pants. Later, in bed with Kit, she'd said, *It was boring. I won't go to a party there again. No one had anything even the*

slightest bit interesting to say. How to explain this? She wanted Kit too much and so she did these things to make herself feel better. She sat at the kitchen table all day, trying to think, smoke from her cigarette filling the kitchen. And then Kit went and got cancer.

Now Bunny kicked the glovebox again. "I'm hungry," she said.

Lena reached across the seat and picked up Bunny's hand. "Let's go home," she said.

"When?" Bunny asked. "When can we go to Disneyland?"

Her little hand was cold in the dock of Lena's palm. Lena waited but Bunny didn't pull it away.

The afternoon went quickly. Bunny sat at the table, drawing on newsprint in front of the kitchen window. "You have a big house," she said. She seemed happy.

"Do you want to live in a big house, Bunny?" Lena asked. She imagined watching Bunny from the window while she rode her bicycle up and down some street, the dark pressed hem of her skirt, the furious pedaling. Beyond the window would be the street and the street would only curve back to the window. It would be that kind of life.

"I want crackers," Bunny said. She drew a lopsided heart on the page and colored it in, wearing the crayon down to a sharp nub.

"Let's get you some lunch, Bunny," Lena said.

"There's no free lunch," Bunny's voice was cold again.

Lena closed her eyes. "Today there is," she said. "Today there is a free lunch for Bunny, winner of the contest!" Lena went to the cupboard. There was no path between then and now, she thought. The loving and the not loving. The road angled off in some

dark way, and only objects were left: Twenty dollars, an old coat, a green purse. The moon-shaped scar. She wanted a drink. She wanted winter to be over.

When she heard the truck turn down the driveway she took Bunny's hand. "Bunny," she said. "I need you to listen to me." She led her down the hall to the study. "I need to talk to my friend for a while. If you stay in this room," she said, "With the door closed, and you are very quiet, and you wait until we come get you—" She looked around. There was a package of cookies on the desk. "Listen," she said. "I'll give you two cookies now. If you're quiet until I come back, you can have two more."

Bunny squinted. "Three more," she said.

"Fine," Lena said. "Four more if you don't make a single noise."

Bunny looked at her. "Deal," she said. Lena heard the truck door close. Her heart was beating fast. She picked up the crayons and newsprint and moved them into the study. She took two cookies and handed them to Bunny, and closed the door. "Be good," Lena said.

Through the door Bunny said, "You be good."

The key in the lock; Kit's steps in the hall.

"Come here," Kit said. "How did it go? Did they come get her?"

Lena put her head on Kit's shoulder, turned her face into her shirt. "I'm scared for her," Lena said.

"I know," Kit said. "But you did the right thing." She ran her hands up and down Lena's back. "You're really good, you know that?" she said. "You're just really good."

She wasn't good, she thought. She slid one hand beneath the waistband of Kit's jeans and held it against the scar. "I love you," she said.

Kit's hand was in her hair. Through the window Lena she could see the falling woodshed, the dark line of the woods.

"I love you back," Kit said. "Come lay down with me for a minute."

In the bedroom Kit pushed Lena's hair out of her eyes. She pulled her down on the bed and lay behind her, one arm around Lena's ribs. She kissed the back of Lena's neck. "She'll be fine," Kit said. She moved her hand under Lena's shirt. It had been a long time since they'd really touched.

"Kit." Lena thought of Bunny in the next room, holding that crayon in her little fist, dragging it over the newsprint. The light had started to fade; the desk, the chair, the dresser were all losing their shapes. Kit leaned over Lena and kissed her, then took off her shirt. Lena looked at her new hair. Kit had never noticed that the starburst hat had gone missing.

"There's things to do," Lena said.

"Like what?" Kit reached forward and unbuckled Lena's belt, pulled her jeans down to her knees. "Don't move," she said. She kissed the pale skin of Lena's stomach.

Lena closed her eyes. The wind shook the storm windows. Outside, she thought, all of that is outside, away from us.

She felt Kit's mouth on her hip. She imagined Bunny leaving the crayons, running toward home. The slap of feet, the creak of branches. The leaves and damp. *Don't move,* she thought. *Just stay right there for a little while.*

Kit's face was hopeful, shining. She was radiant, Lena thought. She closed her eyes and listened. *Be quiet,* she thought. *If you are very quiet, then I'll take you out of here.*

"I love you," Kit said. Lena reached forward and pulled Kit's belt open. She pushed her hand down past the ridge of the scar.

Lena kept her eyes closed. Kit in Ohio, years ago, facedown on the mattress, the dark crown of her hair. Bunny on a bicycle, steering it like a schooner. The things you think will never happen do and then they're done. Kit pushed against her. *I have never loved anyone,* Lena thought, *as much as I love you.*

She kept touching Kit until she pushed Lena's hand away. They lay back on the bed. The waterstains on the ceiling were like rough little countries, a map of some other place.

"I love you," Lena said. "Stay here, okay?" She left Kit lying on the bed and stood up, pulled on her jeans and sweater. "I'll be right back," she said.

Kit watched Lena from the bed. "Hurry," she said. Her cheeks were pink. She was smiling. The scar was a silver crescent in the dark. The wind was picking up outside. To Kit the truck would only be the wind, again.

Lena stepped into the hall. There was a faint light under the study door. One day, years from now, she and Kit would speak again. *I never loved anyone more,* she would say. Even now, she could imagine the words. *I never loved anyone like I loved you*. She reached for the doorknob. She thought: no part of that is a lie.

THE EXPERIMENT

"There's something wrong with that monkey." One of his students was standing over the cage with a handful of cashews that he rattled in his palm. He was wearing an AC/DC t-shirt and had a withered little face—one of those kids you can look at and imagine at seventy or eighty. "I mean, that monkey is *fucked* up."

"*That monkey* is Arthur, and Arthur is fine," Lawrence said. "Perhaps if you don't shake your hand at him like that." He cleared his throat, turned toward the rest of the class. "Why don't you all get out of here early today?"

Everyone filed out obediently, although, he noted, not particularly gratefully. He always let them go early on Wednesdays, and they'd come to expect it. Alone in the room he sat on one of the lab stools, shuffled through a stack of lab reports he didn't want to grade. *The subject (Macaca Mulatta) expressed equal preference in both test cases. Results are inconclusive.* The fluorescents were flickering again. He didn't care. He didn't care about anything today, except getting home. It was exactly two hours, he thought, until he would see her.

Arthur was pounding his palms against the bars of the cage. After each blow he would squat, bare his little teeth, and scream. Lawrence paused at the cage before he turned out the lights. Arthur's toy, a small stuffed hedgehog, had made its way out between the bars; he pushed it back in. "Take it easy, friend," Lawrence said, more for Arthur's benefit than his own. The noise used to bother him, but now he welcomed it. It felt like they were in something together.

There was a gray crust of snow on the ground outside; his tires spun for a minute as he backed out of the lot. It was the beginning of March, bitterly cold. He wiped the foggy windshield with one sleeve and turned east toward the Interstate.

The lab was set apart from the rest of the University. It was ugly; low, beige cinderblocks. He drove an unmarked road from the lab parking lot, past the truck stop where he would sometimes, on a particularly bad day, buy a pack of cigarettes. From there he turned left and onto the freeway, toward his apartment. Condominium. Either way, he thought, the kind of place you lived when you were nearly fifty and definitively alone. No one raised children in these places. He exited the freeway, went through the green light, then turned right into the drive. After nine no one who lived outside of the complex could get in without a code—*the elderly curfew,* he thought.

And still they cost more than was decent. When he first sold the house, he'd liked how little the condo asked of him—the grass was mowed, the sidewalks swept, all by the hands of some assiduous employee. The appliances shone. In a way the rooms seemed so devoted to looking anonymous that he felt no need to assert himself. It was a relief not to care.

But after Julia started coming by, it started to bother him. He bought an aloe plant and a small painting of a lake, but still.

He had barely been home for an hour when she knocked on the door. She was usually late, at least fifteen minutes. He hadn't accounted for timeliness; the chicken was still uncooked, lying raw on its plate. He let her in, kissed her cheek. His stomach contracted, the way it sometimes did when, unbidden, he would suddenly think of the

early days with his ex-wife: the way that she would push a pen behind one seashell ear, or how she could sleep, late into the mornings, completely undisturbed by noise or sunlight. Later, those things flew up and out of his mind, replaced by anger, irritation, and regret.

"How are you, Lawrence?" Julia asked. He liked the way his name sounded when she said it. Her hair was in her face. She was wearing jeans and a sweater. For the first few months of their friendship, she had worn black skirts or short dresses, things that looked beautiful in a forced way. This was better, he thought. She'd gained weight in the last few months, though he didn't care. When he first met her he worried; she had dark circles under her eyes. She seemed nervous all of the time.

"How's the monkey?" she asked, sitting at the table. Forget the chicken, he thought. He opened the refrigerator. There was a round of soft cheese, a leaking container of take-out noodles, a jar of olives, some eggs.

"Oh, not so well." He laughed a little, trying to get comfortable. He didn't drink much but he poured two glasses of wine, bringing one to her at the table. "How was your week?"

She worked part-time for a medical education company, voicing over tapes. She imitated it to him sometimes, standing in the kitchen with her wine glass, her voice an octave lower, a honeyed monotone: *A surgical technologist assists the surgeon throughout the procedure.* He liked to imagine waking up to her in the morning, the broad white of her back, how he would kiss a smooth line from her neck to her tailbone. *A dental hygienist is also an important resource for dental hygiene education.* He had never seen her in the morning but he could picture it—her mouth open, a slip of bare foot

peeking out from beneath the blanket—he would cover it again, he thought, before he left for the lab.

"It was fine," she said. "Same old, same old." She took a sip of wine. "The monkey's not so well?"

"He might be sick." Lawrence unwrapped the cheese, put it on a plate with a knife. He drained the olives and piled them beside it. "Or just bored. It's hard to say." He set the bread on top of its paper bag and brought everything to the table. "I was going to make chicken, but that would take a while," he said. He might have imagined it but she always seemed in a hurry to be done eating. "I could fry an egg?"

"Maybe you should get him a girl monkey," she said. She finished her wine in one long sip. "I'm not that hungry. This is fine."

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe a girl monkey would help."

They ate quickly, talking about nothing, the monkey, he had a new book he thought she might like, she said she might borrow it. Finally he leaned over and kissed her. She followed him into the bedroom.

He took off his clothes carefully, folded them on the chair next to the bed, laid down. He watched her step out of her underwear. She had a condom secreted in her palm; she set it on the corner of the bed. She crawled in next to him, wrapping her arms around his neck. She smelled the same, always. "I missed you," he said. She kissed his temples, his neck. He moved down between her legs, pushed his tongue there until her thighs tightened around his head, "Okay," she said, "Okay." She pushed him away, handed him the condom; he struggled with it, concentrating on how soon he would be inside her. If his thoughts wavered he would lose it.

"Come here," she said when he had it on, pulling him toward her, one hand at the small of his back. Her eyes closed; he pushed into her. He could see a flicker behind her lids—she hooked her ankles around his back. "Come here," she said again. He let his face sink against her neck; that smell; he could die. "I'm here," he said.

A sadness overtook him afterward. She made small talk, retrieving her clothes, drinking a glass of water. He pretended to look away when she took the envelope from the top of bureau, then walked her to the door.

"Next week, same time?"

He nodded. He kissed her behind the door, where no one would see, then watched her walk out to her car.

At the lab the next day, Arthur didn't scream at all, just huddled on his blanket. He really wasn't looking well. His hair was falling out in patches, an odd map was rising to the surface of his back. He was a Rhesus Macaque, the kind of non-human primate most commonly used for testing. He was lucky. Lawrence had secured him for the lab from a shipment of two hundred monkeys that were earmarked for a new drug. In that other life, Arthur would have been given a cocktail of medication, followed by thirty or forty strokes—or however many he could withstand before the restriction of blood to his brain made him an unworthy subject. Here, Lawrence's classes put Arthur through the most banal of behavioral tests: *In the following experiment, we will attempt to determine whether the subject (Macaca Mulatta) prefers a single apple or a plurality of apples.* None of the classes had been able to use him lately, though. Presented with two choices, he would slap the floor and suck his lips, or stare straight ahead, glassy-eyed.

"Come on, friend," he said, opening the cage. He let Arthur sit in his lap, cradled him like a baby. There were no classes on Thursdays, no one in the lab. Arthur was limp in his arms. He liked how it felt, the monkey's warm weight.

He hadn't slept well. Every week he waited for Wednesday, for Julia, but when she left the empty feeling was almost worse than not having her at all. He would lie in the bed that still smelled like her perfume and sex, thinking about it. What bothered him most was how easily he might have never met her. She might have been his waitress, or someone in a movie line, but they wouldn't have spoken. She was half his age. She lived across the city, in some house with roommates—he imagined dishes balanced on the arms of the sofa, wine bottles collecting, a stack of napkins next to the bathroom sink because some one had forgotten to buy toilet paper. Never in her life had she thought about austolopithicines, or how the mammalian cerebral cortex is perfectly developed to give rise to consciousness, or how to excite a Rhesus monkey into choosing a single or plurality of apples.

As it was he had been sifting through Erotic Services postings. It had been eight years since his wife left. He should have been dating, should have been having some lab romance with a blonde graduate student, or something more benign with one of the adjuncts. The adjuncts never came to the lab. A biology graduate sometimes huddled in the corner of one of the steel lab tables, squinting through her glasses. A gold cross hung outside of her mock turtleneck. So he'd just been looking, like he sometimes looked at listings for houses, or old cars, or the personals. The Erotic Services ads were full of nuance and code—f4m, ff4m, GFE, Greek, bareback, dom, full service. He imagined the city as a vast hall of closed doors, and behind each one people doing cryptic,

unimaginably dirty things to each other. But then there was a picture of Julia's face, smiling with closed lips. Her hair was tucked behind her ears. *Sweet student, 24, conversation, kindnesses. Prefer long-term arrangement. $200/hr.*

But now—it had been four months. Sixteen times. The first month or two he'd been carefully formal, but now—it had been sixteen times, he thought. He knew she needed the money; he was more than happy to give her that. But he loved her. He wanted to wake up next to her. It terrified him, to think about what it would have been like to have never met her. The probability that they had met at all was so small that it seemed fateful, like lightening striking twice, or a tornado in a windless state.

Arthur smacked his lips, nuzzling his head against Lawrence's neck. Maybe he should see about getting Arthur a companion, he thought. Mammals were social. "What do you think, friend?" he asked. Julia's skin; her arms stretched over her head; the swell of her ribcage. It didn't matter how they'd met. It was rare, to know that you loved someone. To want to be good to them. He imagined whole lifetimes might pass without that kind of closeness.

The next day his class began work on a new project, a duplicate of the surrogate experiments that Harry Harlow conducted in the late 1950s. Taken from their mothers, baby monkeys were given choice between a terrycloth dummy and a wire one. He left the class with the supplies and went to the phone in the next room. He dialed Julia's number.

"Hello?"

"Hi," he said. The line was silent. "It's Lawrence," he added.

"Hi, Lawrence," she said. "How are you?"

"Oh, fine, fine."

"Did you need to cancel this week?" she asked.

"Oh—no, no." Through the wire-gridded glass of the lab door he could see two of his students, wrapping wire around a piece of wood. "I just—I just thought," he said, "that I would say hello." He took a deep breath. "I had a good time the other day."

"Well," she said. "I'm glad."

"How's your day?" he asked. He wanted to sound casual. Through the window he watched one of the girls wrap a terrycloth towel around her midsection, like a dress. The boy with the old face wound his towel into a rope a snapped it at her, making her jump. He laughed and his teeth were like a row of little corn kernels.

"Oh, fine," she said. "It's fine. I can't really talk right now, Lawrence."

"Oh—I'm sorry," he said—"No problem—just—I'll see you Wednesday?"

"Of course," she said. "Of course Wednesday. I'll see you then, Lawrence." The phone clicked; he felt a spreading warmth in his cheeks. Wednesday.

He went back to the class, stood next to the students who were pinning terrycloth onto a cat scratch post. Arthur would choose the terrycloth dummy, he knew. If he didn't, it was only because the experiment was imperfect. It had been proven again and again; everything was written in the blood.

When he began his research that had excited him—the links between individuals, between common ancestors, the order in a disorderly world. He could talk about it for hours, lying with his ex-wife in the dim bedroom, her legs slung over his. And she'd been so excited. Excited at his happiness—such a tender, simple thing.

He remembered one night with his ex-wife, long before things had started to go wrong, when her body was still a revelation to him, her presence a windfall—an unexpected fortune that might be suddenly taken away. She reached down and put one hand on his chest, over his heart; she held it there while she came; in all of this predictability, he'd thought, in all the giantness of the universe, you are mine, and I am yours, and that is the real miracle.

He took Julia out to dinner the next week, to a steak house with white linen napkins, candles, butter in the shape of an autumn leaf. "Look at that," she said, tapping her butter knife against the little dish. "I hardly want to touch it."

The restaurant was near the lab. He didn't know why he wanted to bring her there so badly but the thought wouldn't go away. In the car on the way back to the condo he turned down the bleak stretch toward the lab, past the warehouses and maintenance building and the fogged-up booth of the shuttle stop. "Where are we going?" Julia asked. She turned to him, touched his knee, smiled. She was always smiling.

"I just thought I would take you to see something," he said.

"Oh?" she asked. She seemed surprised. He'd taken her to dinner before, but then they'd always gone straight back to the condo with its carefully made bed.

"You'll see," he said.

He had been lonely when he met her—aching, to-the-bones lonely, like being too long in the cold. He had loved his wife, but by the time she left, with the car, and half the assets, she was a stranger to him. It amazed him how quickly someone could go from being so close to so impenetrable. For a long time after that he hadn't wanted to talk to

anyone, let alone touch them. But now things were different. He reached over and put one hand on Julia's thigh and squeezed.

He parked the car in the empty parking lot. "Oh," she said. "The lab!" She sounded relieved, like she'd worried about where they were going.

He got out of the car, went around, unlocked her door. It was sleeting a little; he pulled his coat closer around him. Julia climbed out of the car. "Follow me," he said.

He unlocked the door and hit the light switch. The fluorescents hummed. The terrycloth and wire dummies, half-finished, listed along one wall. Arthur was in the corner of his cage, his hedgehog in one hand. He screamed a little, but it was soft and hoarse-sounding.

Julia rushed toward the cage. She kneeled in front of it, looking at Arthur. "Oh, God," she said. "You poor thing." Arthur looked up at her warily. "You poor thing. Lawrence, can't you take him out of here?" She looked up at him, blinking fast, like she might cry.

He unlocked the door of the cage and pulled Arthur out, wrapping his arms around his neck. "He's okay," he said. "He's just tired."

Julia held one hand above the monkey's patchy back, as though she wanted to pet him but wasn't yet sure. "He looks sick," she said.

"Do you want to hold him?" Lawrence asked.

She looked from him to Arthur. "I—well—okay." She was beautiful. Her ponytail had slipped to one side; the sleet had made a tattoo of dark spots on her coat. He held Arthur closer to him, leaning over to kiss her. She smiled a half-smile.

"Arthur, go to Julia," he said, handing the monkey over. Arthur wrapped his arms around her neck. She took him, rocked him a little. He made a chattering noise.

"Oh, you poor thing," she said. "Poor little monkey."

It was a funny thing about monkeys, he thought, how impossible it was not to love them. Julia looked at Arthur with a tenderness he'd never seen. His heart felt like it was swelling, like it might burst. He took a deep breath.

"I love you," he said. She took her eyes off of Arthur and looked at him. "I love you, Julia," he said.

She kept rocking Arthur, lifting one foot, then the other. She gave Lawrence that same half-smile. "Oh, Lawrence," she said slowly.

He didn't remember the trip home. He must have put Arthur back in the cage, turned out the lights, locked up the building. Driven the Interstate back to the condo. She followed him to the door but he stopped just outside. "I'm not feeling well," he said, "So maybe we could wait til next week…for…?" He pulled the envelope from his pocket, gave her the money.

She nodded, took the envelope, smiled at him sadly. "Good night, Lawrence," she said.

He went upstairs, padding up the too-white carpet. He lay down on the bed. Outside the sleet drummed the windows. In the natural world they had never really existed, he thought. Evolutionarily speaking, he and Julia had broken the rules. He thought of the envelope. Before, when he'd left it on the bureau, she would slip it into her purse without mention, as though it meant nothing. As though it was secondary to the more important thing, which was the two of them, together. Lawrence and Julia. He

crawled under the blankets, lay there in the dark. Nowhere in the study of biological continuity, of desire, he thought, did it mention how inscrutable the heart is, or how terrible it might be to belong to someone.

She cancelled the next meeting. She was sick, she said. He called her once, left a message telling her he hoped she felt better; he imagined her picking up the phone, looking at it, turning off the ringer. He pushed the thought away. People get sick, he thought. In the lab he stood beside Arthur's cage.

Love, his coworker would always say, is just the product of an evolutionary arms race. He thought of the way that Julia had kneeled in front of the cage—*you poor thing*, she kept saying, *you poor, poor thing*, and he could hear it—how certain she was, how sorry.

He opened the door of the cage and pushed a handful of cashews toward Arthur. The monkey just sat there, staring out at nothing. It is the darkest sorrow, he thought, how very separate we are. Lawrence took one of the rough little hands in his own, unfolded it and set a nut there. "Eat it, friend," he said, but Arthur didn't turn. Lawrence sat there with him. In the quiet he imagined he could hear his own heart beat, just an echo, he thought, of any other lifetime.

DOLLYWOOD

21 March

Dearest Squeen of Squeens, winner of last year's Squeen award, and every year before and after,

I wrote to No. 10 Downing Street and requested—nay, demanded—that they erect a statue of you on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square. Mr. Blair's art advisors called me last night and asked in which pose you should be cast. I thought about the many pictures etched on my mind. I wandered through the aisles of memory, from the flat in Hove to the far corners of the Earth: The way the light hit you in the kitchen over the cooker as you lovingly dropped fag-ash into the dinner whilst bent double, ahh. The time in the bar toilet when you dropped your knickers halfway down your legs and took a photo of your fanny hair, bless. That dive into the pool with your gingham dress still on, to be removed afterwards. The time you fell down the well drunk, cackling, so sweet, and sent your boyfriend of the week running back to Staines. And, of course, the time in the fountain at the festival, taking your bra off and swinging it round your head. All good images of a Squeen at her height of squeenliness. But in the end one powerful, enduring vision rose above all the others. The statue will be made of the Squeen atop a white hire car with her legs akimbo, red silk dress up round her waist, knickers on full view, enjoying life to the full, as it should be. Anyway Naughtiest Nina, you are the loveliest lady in the world.

Love always

Your Dewy

Xxxx

Dewy knocked on Nina's door. He was wearing a blonde Dolly Parton wig and carrying a tiny suitcase.

"Nina!" he cried. "Squeen! I've missed you terribly!" He held his arms out. "My dear one, my mouse, my little debaucher!" He smelled of PG Tips and tobacco.

It had frosted overnight; to the west she could see the hard grey chop of the water. She slid her foot against the door jam. "Where's Ian?" she asked. "Did you leave him?" That would be the best answer, she thought. That would be the best of all worlds.

"Neen, let me in," he said. "Please?" The wig was listing to one side and he reached up and lofted it to her.

"Come in," she said, and moved her foot.

She had a few pills Deirdre had left her. He followed her to the sofa and they sat. Dewy slung his feet up into her lap and kneaded his socks against her stomach, like the tomcat that she sometimes let in from the garden.

"Let's go to Dollywood," he said. "What'dya think, pard-ner?"

"Piss off," she said.

"Good," he said. "That settles it. Someplace warm. I'm almost forty years old and I feel like I've never been warm."

He pressed his feet against her hips. His socks were pilled. She hadn't seen him in five years. He was thinner now, but Dewy was always thin. They both were. She remembered lying next to him one night on a trip to France, when they rented a room

with walls thin as cardboard. There was only one narrow bed; their ribs pressed together, the two of them all bones and thin skin and bruises.

"Squeen," he said, and she wanted to forgive him. It was hopeless, she thought. All of that time spent hating him was wasted.

"Did you leave Ian?" she asked.

"Ian's dead," he said. He was so thin. He sat up, then moved toward her, clumsily, like he'd lost his balance. He lay his head in her lap. He was crying. "He died on Tuesday."

The pills were making her feel full of air. "How?" she asked.

After Dewy and Ian moved to London, Dewy had written a little at first, then nothing. Brighton felt to her like a dusty shipwreck. She'd imagined the two of them at posh parties, running up and down the streets of London hand-in-hand while she stayed at home and got drunk and old.

His head was heavy on her lap, wet. "He was sick for a long time, Squeen," he said.

Dewy's absence had nagged at her. When she thought of him it was like a hard wire dragging through her: The orange monstrosity of a coat hanging in the shop window that he would have worn with shameless gusto; his birthday horoscope: *Learn another language. Buy land. There will be many trespasses.* She kept remembering, inexplicably, how when they drove he would always say "my way" or "your way" instead of left or right, as if they were precise points in an atlas of opinion.

In her lap, now, his faced pressed against her stomach. He wound his fingers into the fabric of her shirt.

"I just want to sleep here tonight," he said. "Please, Squeen."

He slept on the davenport and then, after a few days, in her bed. The flat was subsidized by the government and she was still drawing a small check from the NHS after having to leave work for the Hep C treatment. She'd done the medical records at a clinic in Kemptown for years; eventually she'd have to go back, but she didn't like to think about it.

She didn't ask about money because you didn't ask Dewy about money. It was rain to him, slipping through gutters, running through his hands, but there was always more. When they had first known each other he was selling acid on squares of thin paper, and she imagined he must have been doing the same thing in London, or maybe not. Someone would help him, at any rate. He had a little boy's face, and it made people want to protect him.

In the daytime they sat at home and watched old films. Dewy had always liked movies, but there had never been time. Now they took in all of the old greats, Ingrid Bergman, Katherine Hepburn, Doris Day. Movies staged like plays, all in one or two rooms. Someone is crying, someone is wearing a dress to dinner. Nina would fall asleep on the sofa at one or two, waking at four to find Dewy still awake and rapt while the hero embraced the heroine—another one of those endings.

Only once did she ask him about Ian. He said only, *I miss him.*

Dewy starting seeing Ian when they were sharing the flat in Hove, with its high ceilings and teardrop chandelier, peeling wallpaper, decadent decay. Ian came by on Sunday mornings after the methadone clinic.

The first time she'd been excited. She answered the door at seven in the morning. She knew that after he left they would sit cross-legged on the floor and talk about him, about his body and his impossibly long fingers and how doomed it was, with the methadone and all.

And they had. Ian put on his suit jacket and left for his job in the Lanes, selling fine tailored shirts, his track-marked arms neatly secreted under expensive fabrics. Nina poured drinks and put on an old Sex Pistols record that skipped.

"Well?" Dewy asked. His hair had a cowlick at the crown; he pressed his palm against it, a nervous tick. "Well, what do you think?"

"Tall," she said, "Dark, handsome. Terrible accent. Military posture."

Dewy stood, straightened his back, marched around the room. "Ah Nina," he said, "How very lovely to meet you. I've just been round to the shops—and when I say shops, I mean the old Clean Up and Dry Out Center for Ex-Drug Pushers Who Are Now Terribly Handsome." He bowed in front of her then straightened again, grandiosely, the perfect image of Ian's formality.

"Watch your heart," she said.

Dewy could be anyone, that was the thing. She'd met him at a costume party when he was dressed as John Lennon—early John Lennon, 1963, the Royal Variety; he stood on one of the tables with a toy guitar. *Those in the cheaper seats clap,* he yelled. *The rest of you rattle your jewelry.* He kept the Liverpool accent on all night, until twelve or one when he finished the third bottle of wine and stormed the host's closet. He danced with all of the single women, wearing his John Lennon suit pants with a stolen shawl and a pair of decorative wooden clogs.

She was dressed as Dolly Parton. She'd teased her hair up in a tall bouffant, tucked two balloons under her sweater. When they left she popped them with a pin. He rode her home on the back of his motorbike.

They had gone to Spain that spring. Dewy lined his suitcase with pills and bought an eight-ball off of a bartender. They'd danced in a club that smelled like diesel. The music thumped, *Get up, get up, and dance.* He pulled her close to him and she pushed her face into his neck—smell of cologne, damp with sweat. Her cigarette burned her fingers; she'd lost her shoes. *Dance, pretty, get up and dance.* She could feel the blood moving through her veins, the music too loud, borne on a wanting, boundless and perfect, that reminded her that there were things to want for, that the world was big and she had only touched a second of it. .

They tried to have sex in Spain. Dewy was slow out of the closet, although he wouldn't have put it that way. Men bored him, he said, but he looked at them then with the eyes of a dog. For all of his flamboyance and charm, for all of his crass jokes, in the face of attractive men he tunneled into himself. He grew quiet and withdrawn.

What happened was as much of an accident as any of it. They had handfuls of pills, a bottle of gin. A rush of color and sound, everything larger than it should have been. A girl who couldn't have been more than twelve sang mournfully on the street corner. Nina's shoes cut her feet and so she took them off, the cobbles cool under her bare feet. A dark red flower that some man had tucked into her hair dropped its bowl-shaped petals as she walked.

Dewy was shouting and singing, hopping up on to curbs and city planter boxes, tugging at her hand. There was the fountain; they drank from the plastic gin bottle with

their feet sunk into the cold water. They went back to the room and on the way a stooped man with a beard sold Dewy a bouquet of tulips and he handed them to her with a flourish, threw them into her arms.

In the room she'd decided to stuff them into her pants—Dewy had a camera, they were taking photographs of her with her skirt off, all of these tulips blooming up from between her legs. She was on her knees and laughing. *Ah, this way,* he said, *Your petals are all askew*—she kissed him; he kissed her back; they fumbled their way to the bed. She pulled his belt from his pants quickly in one motion. His tongue was wild in her mouth.

He couldn't sit up straight; she couldn't get her buttons undone. She stopped to cross the room and find the gin again and regretted it; in that moment, he seemed to rethink things. He pulled his pants back up.

"Squeen," he said. It wasn't the way he usually said her name, but grave and serious, like a warning. She took a long drink, turned back, smiled, but it was over, then. They slept carefully, on opposite sides of the bed.

That was the first time, and the last, that anything had happened. She was relieved, afraid that if they had kept going that night, everything would have changed between them, but still—still, she thought, there was no pretending now that it wasn't between them, what she wanted and he didn't.

3 August

Dear Squeenster,

I'm not writing to you for any reason, only because I feel glum and wish I was lying in the sun with you by a mountain swimming pool. I wish it was so hot that we had to talk in whispers for fear of tiring ourselves out. All we had to do was eventually gather enough strength to pour another G & T. Do you think we'll ever do that again Squeeny? I can dream can't I? I've got your lovely card and I'm keeping it. I look at it every day and try to add up the impossible equation of those who love and those who hate. If there was a god he would know that we're good really. I know I do bad things, I wish I knew why or how not, I've just been made that way and if I stopped being bad there wouldn't be any of me left. Badness is all I have.

Love always

Your Dewy

xxxx

When he'd been visiting for two months, they went to the Isle of Wight. The little red ferry bobbed and splashed its way to an empty port and abandoned them in the damp gray sand. Empty carousels and boarded-up seaside shops. Everything dusted over. Seagulls circled wildly, hungry and wailing.

Dewy was tired. Nina thought of the row of prescription pill bottles next to the sink in the flat, each labeled carefully with his name and the name of a doctor in London. She didn't ask him the questions that lit on her tongue because they seemed unnecessary. *How long do you have? Tomorrow? Next year? A lifetime?*

Time was deceptive. She'd never thought they would grow old, not really.

They walked up and down the beach, peered into the windows of the shops at the yellowing merchandise. They sat on the beach against the pilings and she rolled cigarettes for them to smoke.

"What was it like, with Ian?" she asked. "Were you still in love with him?" She tried to keep her voice even. She realized that there were some things that trumped anger, that made grudges immediately obsolete and petty, and that death was one of those things. Death, war, and disaster—maybe death most of all, she thought.

"Off and on," Dewy said. "But most of the time, yes."

"What was your place like?" How many times had she gone up to the city to shop, or to the doctor, or to see Deirdre, and looked at the rowhouses and the flats and wondered which one was his? Deirdre had rolled her eyes at the whole thing—she was Nina's oldest friend, the most practical. She'd thought Dewy was just a typical married fag, too caught up to call.

Dewy waved the question away. "Ian liked *Oriental rugs,"* he said. He laughed and flicked his cigarette out into the water. "And *bamboo,"* he said. He shrugged. "Roll me another one." He slipped off his shoes and peeled down his black socks—pale feet, long toes. "You would have hated it there. Positively hated it."

She swallowed the words—*Maybe you should have invited me. Maybe you should have told me Ian was dying.* But Dewy was laughing, burrowing his pale feet in the sand. "He also enjoyed donning a kimono now and then," he said.

She let herself laugh. The wind picked up and the beach was suddenly cold and bleak. The tide pulled back and turned the stones at the water's edge over, one by one. No one goes to the beach in February.

"Let's go out dancing," she said. "Come on, Dewy."

She wanted very badly for them to have one night where things were the same again. She wanted them to get drunk, laugh too hard, have a time of it. After Spain she'd applied for a stack of credit cards and they would check in at Heathrow, wing their way over to Goa or Ibiza or Greece. Dewy could find anyone with speed, pills, *Let's go,* she'd say, *Let's* go *somewhere.* It was the doing that was important, that they did something and they did it together, went on the lash, walked through the busy bright streets. When she went on the Hep C treatment she was angry, in a stupid ill mood all the time that she couldn't live the way she wanted to anymore. She was grateful, almost, when her hair fell out and her skin pigment went weird, because she was too tired and felt too ugly to miss it.

On the beach, Dewy looked doubtful. "Dancing?" he asked.

"Please?" She just wanted them to have a *time*, like he would say when they would come in the next morning, energy like static electricity still all around them—*That was a* time. The sort of time, she thought with disappointment, you can't premeditate.

The club in Brighton, when they made their way from the pier to the faintly lit door, was too warm. She felt ill-dressed. She was wearing a sweater that she took off and looped around her waist. The room was full of girls in their twenties, all of them in tight black pants and too-low tops.

A glass sweated in Dewy's hand. She pulled him by his belt loops out to the dance floor; colored lights, a song she didn't know. He danced with her but she might have been dancing with her father. After one song he sat down on a stool by the bar.

It was too loud to talk. A man in a suit asked her if he could buy her a drink. She took it, drank it quickly. She had lived her life in bars, she thought. The man's hand landed lightly at the small of her back. He steered her toward the dance floor.

They danced for two or three songs. He stepped on her feet. In the middle of the third song he pulled her off the floor; she let him lead her out to his car, a white mini. He leaned her against it and began to kiss her neck, to work his way under her shirt. Dewy had gone, that was always the old plan—if a man bought one of them two drinks, the other would slip away to the dance floor or the cold sidewalk or the back of a cab.

"You're lovely," the man kept saying. He had the faintest mustache that dragged a slow burn across her neck and lips.

My best friend is dying, she thought about saying for a second. *Me, I had a close call, but now the NHS pays my rent.*

"My flat's just over on Second," the man said. "I'll drive."

She pushed past him before she really knew what she was doing. Her hands felt heavy, clumsy. The man let her go and then called in a weak voice, "Cunt—" It sounded like a question.

She walked home, letting the cabs pass her. Brighton was laid out along the sea front. It was a city where things existed in extremes, pitted against each other. Too many drugs and too many treatment centers. Old ballrooms and whorehouses, archaically beautiful, mixing with the bright flashing lights from the seaside dance clubs.

When she came in Dewy was sitting on the floor next to the hot water heater. The room was dark and somehow in the dim light the dust seemed more apparent, overwhelming. She hadn't wanted to stay in this flat. It was tiny, with the kitchen on the ground floor. The shower was in the bedroom, behind a flimsy door fifty centimeters from the end of the bed. It was nearly six hundred pounds a month—ridiculous. But it was on the NHS list and it had grown on her.

"How was that?" he asked, half-smiling. There was a time when he would have patted the floor beside him and made her sit and tell him everything: the size, the franticness, the intricacy of fumbling and the awkward parting conversation. Now Dewy just smiled at her. It wasn't a smile she had seen before.

"I left," she said. "Obviously."

He gave a choked sort of laugh, a chuckle.

"He called me a cunt," she said.

Dewy didn't look at her, but gave that choked laugh again, and she realized he was crying.

"I didn't even go to the funeral," he said. "I didn't fight it."

She sat down beside him with her feet out in front of her, studying her shoes.

"They wouldn't let me come," he said. "They didn't want anyone to know." He gave the choked laugh again. "And don't you think—if I could do it again—"

She put one hand on the side of his face. It was cool and damp, as though he'd just been out in the rain.

"I just—I should have insisted," he said. "I should have gone anyway."

"This wasn't how it was supposed to be, Dewy," she said. "And I hate it."

"You didn't invent feeling that way," he said. "Did you think you invented it?" It didn't sound angry, just a question. *Did you think you invented it?*

She lay on her back on the floor and looked at the ceiling. She thought maybe she had.

A month later, a gray Tuesday, she stood outside, hanging laundry on the frayed line. The back door of the flat opened onto a thatch of grass, no more than six feet long and fenced by a low wall of gray cement. She strung the line from an eye hook above the door to a narrow, anemic tree just over the wall. It was cutting through the bark, bleeding a weak, dark sap down the trunk. Slips the color of flesh; her mottled, threadbare bathrobe; Dewy's undershirts housed the watery wind like a body, arms lifting and dropping and lifting again. The wind was beating the flat, pinning leaves to the siding. The smell of hot stone in the air, a match struck—somewhere a neighbor was burning leaves. When she turned he was standing spread-legged against the doorframe.

"Squeen," he said.

His legs swayed under him. His arms drifted out, a child on a balance beam. His mouth opened like he was going to say something, then shut quickly. He looked for all the world like a newborn foal. Then he was on the ground.

At the hospital the doctor reprimanded him. "You haven't been taking any of it?" he asked. "Andrew, HAART is your best chance for extending time. You know this. Why would you stop taking it?"

Dewy didn't answer. His face was white and there were flush red apples on his cheeks and neck. He wouldn't look at her.

He was laid up with the fever for days. He moved to the davenport because of the sweats, fevered dreams that soaked the sheets and left her feeling terrified. She wasn't worried about catching the virus; it was vaguer than that, something vicious and uneasy. It reminded her of when she was a child and her grandfather had died; someone had given her a flower and she dropped it, afraid of the death in it.

After Dewy left on Ian's arm for London, she stopped going out. She'd had a long line of boyfriends when they had the flat in Hove. They both did—Dewy's fledgling sex life began to take off, and they would take turns dissecting each other's various men and pronouncing them all wanting: Rob the musician, who couldn't pay his rent; Corban with the drinking problem; Eric the accountant who carried a tin of mints in his pocket and cracked them loudly between his stained teeth.

It wasn't that she couldn't have fun without Dewy. It wasn't that at all. Just that things seemed less interesting. She moved out of Hove into the little flat in Brighton proper. And then the Interferon and Ribavirin treatment—she was half sick all the time, and sorry for things. Everyone had Hep C, even Dierdre suspected she had it now, but still. Guilt was the cracked linoleum, the stained wallpaper—just one more thing that wouldn't come clean.

Sometimes at night she could hear the crowds emptying into the streets, the groups of revelers jumbling down toward the beach to sit on the grey sand, watch the dark water, the twin piers. She and Dewy had been in that throng more than once, years before, the thin trails of smoke from their cigarettes standing white in the night air while they looked out at the water. The new pier was a hazard of lights, noise, teenagers

slipping sweaty hands up under each other's shirts. The old pier made her think of cobwebs—gray and ornate, fragile as china.

Sometimes, the years after the letters stopped, she would call London and demand to speak to him. It was usually after she'd been drinking, when she felt reckless and hopeful, wanting both to hurt him and to bring him back. Ian's voice was measured, articulate.

"Let me talk to Dewy," she'd said, the last time she tried. It was maybe two years ago. "Let me talk to Dewy, you fucker."

Her mouth tasted of chalk. She was lonely. Sometimes she wished for a dog, a little brown dog that would smell warm and stale and gulp food. She imagined feeling the floor tremble, glancing up to find it scratching, beating one dark foot against a flea-found ear. That was what she wanted—mundane companionship.

There was a muffled noise on the other end of the telephone. Ian cleared his throat. "He's busy," he said. "I'm so sorry, Nina." There was a click and the phone disconnected.

She put down the receiver, then picked it up and slammed it down again. The flat was silent.

There was something she wanted to say. If she had been able to talk to him she thought it would come to her—something about fairness, and abandonment, and trust. Something about how they had ruined themselves together, and then—and then this.

It went like this: if a man bought one of them two drinks, the other went home or dancing or to look over the menu at the bar. And if one of them wasn't at home that night, then they would be in the morning. Maybe—*maybe*—late afternoon.

02 November

Hi Squeen,

I've got a doctor's appointment today and I'm a bit scared. I already cancelled an appointment last week by talking myself out of going but I have got something wrong with me. One thing I'm very bad at is getting fluids in, I realized the other day that I go for days only drinking PG Tips and beer. I know that most people drink water and they all walk around with mineral bottles but I always think that's just marketing. But at any rate Squeeny there's been blood in my stools and some soreness in my groin above willy on either side. The urologist keeps feeling my nuts and says they're normal, only they are not bloody normal, they are constantly giving me pain and there is something wrong in the state of Denmark.

Dewy

In December, when he'd been with her for nearly a year, the West Pier collapsed and the entire city ran down to the water to watch it slide into the channel, a gray, tiered wedding cake sliding off of its rickety pilings. She was near the seawall when it happened and she let the crowd draw her along. The waves were the color of steel. The wind cut through her thin coat.

She watched a woman drag a heavy pole back up the sand, a father with three children filling their outstretched arms with scraps. *There,* someone was shouting. *Get that piece over there.*

She filled her pockets with rusty nails that had washed ashore. They were bent and cold to the touch; inside her coat she slipped them through her fingers. She wanted something to keep, she thought, though it was all just clutter, red with rust, heavy with water. She felt certain that he would be dead before the spring.

He was on the davenport when she got home. He wore her tiny blouse and blue jeans. She had frozen a tray of tonic water so he could suck on slivers of ice, and it was beside him, melted and spreading slowly across the coffee table. There were stacks of newspaper, tissues knotted like flowers, pill boxes. Glasses of stale water. The thinnest line of light sieved beneath the shade.

Five years, she thought, and a handful of letters that said everything that wasn't important. There were things she wanted to say: *I'm sorry. Fuck you. Fear for your life. I love you.* She swept a hand through the bouquets of tissue and they drifted up in the air and down to the floor.

"Why did you let him?" she asked. "Why would you let him do that?"

His throat was swollen, his tongue like an oyster. It lay on his bottom lip, gray and dry. He made a noise, a small whine. She wanted to hit him. For being sick, for loving Ian, for loving Ian more than he loved her.

"Why did you let him?" she asked again. "Five years, Dewy. *Five years* you let him keep you from talking to me?"

There was spit, white and dry in the corner of his mouth, and she wiped it away. There were never any sirens, she thought. She wished she had known when to stop loving him.

"Nina," he said. His voice was like gravel.

The blanket was pulled back on his hairless chest, shoulders pointed like small, terrible hills, hollow cheeks. His skin was as mottled as the pears they had grown outside the flat in Hove, yellow pears that were eaten to lace by insects.

He looked at her for a long time.

"It wasn't Ian," he said. "I didn't want you to know—I didn't want to—" The corners of his mouth twitched involuntarily.

"But you're here," she said. "How the fuck were you going to hide it?"

He just looked at her and shrugged, the sharp bones of his shoulders lifting and falling again. "I missed you every day," he said. His eyes were rheumy, yellow-casted. They watered down toward his ears and it was impossible to tell if he was crying. He kept a balled tissue in between his thin fingers.

"Sometimes," she said, "I wished you were dead."

The water glasses were still sitting like solemn attendants, fogged over, old. She thought about knocking them over but the anger had gone out of her, like a quick exhalation of breath. She sat down beside him and his feet pressed against her. She felt tired.

In a way he'd always been hers.

"I'm sorry we didn't go to Dollywood," she said.

He was crying, now. "Remember the night we met?" he asked. "The motorbike?"

They'd left the costume party together—he was still wearing his John Lennon suit. Her sweater was stretched out from where the balloons had been; her hair was wilted and smelled of hairspray.

When the rain began they had been on his motorbike, still twenty minutes from the neighborhood they both lived in. Nina sat on the back, her hands on the coarse fabric of his suit. The water came so quickly. Her cheek was against the soaked cloth; her feet dragged the ground. She pulled them higher. She could see nothing, not the lights up ahead, not the ground slipping away. She thought they might crash then, slip and be pinned under the bike's steaming bulk, but Dewy kept going, his head down, through the curtains of rain.

"I do," she said, and he smiled. From the window came the sound of laughter, the bright ring of one bottle against another, a teenage crowd on its way to the shore.

His chest was a sunken map, a blue-gray grid of veins. She lifted his head and gave him water. A small thing, to not be thirsty. You were never as beautiful as that day, she thought. She held his head. You were never as beautiful as that. In the dark it was just them, her face against his suit. She held on while he carried them. It was their city. It was all beginning.

THE ISLAND

In February one of the fishing boats went down in the harbor and the curved roof of the monastery collapsed, leaving a wide mouth of rubble where the bell tower used to be. I watched a man named Vangellis kill himself by jumping from that gutted roof into the sea. His wife stood on the ground, moaning, *the children, the goats, the house, your mother, my mother*, a list of everything that would be lost.

I wanted to leave the island but the boats weren't running. The *Naxos Pride* and the *Piraeus Dream* were rocking in the Athens harbor, three hours away. We hadn't had newspapers in a month and there were no fresh vegetables. Cigarette smoke hung in the port office.

"Today?" I asked. "Do you think today?"

The man looked at me and tapped a long ash from his cigarette onto the creased boat schedules. "Maybe today." He shrugged. "Maybe tomorrow. Who can say this?"

I wanted to leave for good. The office was a tiny cubby. The sound of worry beads, the occasional cough, the driving rain. If there was a way off the island it wasn't something anyone would tell me. In winter everything operated on a system of favors: remember how I fed you, remember the pig I gave you when yours was lost, remember the time you slept with my wife. It was a language of intimacy, a gathering I wasn't invited to. I sat in my cold apartment and watched the goats in the neighboring field. Their hooves stuck in the mud; they hid from the rain beneath a pile of scrap wood, bleating as it grew dark. It seemed like the night always had longer to go.

I went back to the port office again the next morning. "Maybe tomorrow," the man said, and I walked home on the flooded streets. The white stone alleys of Paroikia wound in circles through the heart of town, spilling out onto dirt roads that led up the mountainside, to the huts of old men, the houses of the rich expatriates, and the landfill. No trash left the island, just accumulated slowly on the side of the hill. The spindly legs of broken furniture, bottles, gray flags of bedsheet whipping in the wind. The flood had turned the dirt roads into waterways. Trash floated in eddies. I picked my way over rocks, up away from the waterline. The reservoirs had flooded out and the taps were running rusty and fetid.

Christophile was waiting at the apartment, standing in the muddy foyer. "No boat?" she asked. "Ah, it's no problem. We have big plans here, no?"

Christophile was nineteen, and she lived in the apartment below me. I called it an apartment but really it was one of the illegally owned hotels, closed because the floods had rendered it unlivable. Christophile had a room because her uncle knew someone, and her husband, Thanos, had left for work in Sparti. She was waiting for him to make enough money to bring her there, to get them a house. I had come to the island for a caretaking job that dissolved while I was on a plane somewhere over the Atlantic. As a peace offering, the man who had arranged the job walked me to the hotel and showed me the unlocked rooms, the six inches of floodwater in the corners. "No one is supposed to be here," he said, "But no one will know." I had a return ticket to Athens for a year later, six paperbacks, and a hotplate. Christophile had a kitchen table and a cat figurine made with the hair of the island strays. She was also four months pregnant.

"So," she said, following me into the gutted front room of my apartment, "We read?"

Christophile wanted her baby to speak English and so in the afternoons we read through one of my books, the travelogue of a Fulbright scholar who had gone to Peru to live with the Akarama tribe. We stopped for words she didn't know: scarlet, parrot, rattle. The book was filled with Spanish and Peruvian colloquialisms, outsized flowers, sand, bamboo. It was like reading an inventory of the Greece I'd once imagined, the one that didn't really exist.

The front room was too cold, so we moved into the bedroom and sat on the bed. It made me self-conscious to be so close to her.

I closed the book. "I want to leave," I said.

Christophile smiled. "So leave," she said.

"No boats."

Christophile was propped on her elbows on my bed. "You don't want to leave," she said. "You miss your boyfriend or something?"

I didn't have a boyfriend, but Christophile didn't believe it. "Don't you?" I asked.

"Thanos hates to be away," she said. "This he tells me so often." I fought back jealousy. On the ground floor, in the corner of Christophile's room, was a wooden bee hive Thanos had built for her. I imagined him showing her how to open it, smiling and touching the copper hinge, helping her into the gloves and netting so she wouldn't be stung.

"I think it is the most important thing," she said. "To be in love." She lay back on the bed. Her stomach was barely round, a little dune.

Before the floods stopped, three more buildings collapsed in town and two girls missed a turn on a motorbike and crashed near the Valley of Butterflies. Baghdad was bombed and in one of the seafront bars I watched a woman on an American news station adjust the pin on her blazer. *Today's invasions are said to have been a success,* she said, *Things are returning to normal in the city.* On the hillside outside of Paroikia someone wrote USA in twelve-foot letters and lined a swastika with stones on top of it.

A man from the village began to offer rides off the island on his battered catamaran, steering it through the rain. "He just bring you to another cold, wet island," Christophile said. "He just leave you in other place that is just the same."

It didn't matter. I had built a world so bright and real around Greece that when it didn't exist I couldn't bring myself to tell anyone, as though I'd made the white sand and the dazzling sun and the tony job disappear myself, and I didn't want to have to own up to what I'd done. It felt suspicious that what I'd wanted to get away from, the shabbiness of that other life, was something I'd carried with me.

I'd made a single phone call in the weeks I'd been there, to my parents. I imagined them passing the phone back and forth in the kitchen. The peeling wallpaper, dishes in the sink, silverfish. I stood in the Paroikia square, holding the cold telephone receiver. There was a delay in the connection and I spoke into a long silence.

"Hello?" I kept asking, and finally, the sound of my mother clearing her throat.

"Are you watching the news?" I asked.

"How are you?" My mother's voice was frantic.

"I'm fine."

"What news?"

"I love you."

"Your father has a new shift. What news?"

"I'm fine," I said again. "The war."

"We miss you," my father said.

"No," my mother said.

"Tell him congratulations," I said, and then a stern recording cut the line and the call was over.

I gave Christophile new words each day. Inexorable, venerable, lust; the walls were so thin. "You are not *pretentious,*" I said. "You are *benevolent."* The cold blew through, and the wind. My sheets had spots of mildew on them. I put cornstarch in my shoes. Words meant different things. *Maybe today* meant *the boats will run when they want to. Tomorrow* meant *keep waiting. I want to leave* meant *I don't know why I stay.*

No one noticed I was living in the hotel. Whenever I would bring it up to Christophile she would shrug. "In the summer, then they notice," she said. "But they don't care. They go to the police and the police say, 'Tough luck! This is illegal hotel!' Until then, it is just—" She shrugged and lifted her arm to indicate the echoing stone rooms, the pools of water growing in the hall. "It is just an empty place."

We cooked cans of soup and fish on my hotplate and watched the goats beneath us. They stood in the driving rain, rutting in the mud. The room had a smell that was

getting worse. Every day I swept out the water with a stiff-bristled broom and every night it was back, a seam that spread from the corners, a shifting dark map.

One morning, Christophile put down her fork and looked at me. "I'm afraid about the baby," Christophile said.

"You'll know what to do," I said.

"I want to be good," she said.

"You will be," I said.

"There is no choice," Christophile said. She looked down at her stomach. It was bigger now, visible through her sweater.

"*Inevitable,"* I said.

In the summer, that distant season, the island was one of the lesser-known tourist destinations. In the winding alleys of town, Christophile told me, men laid out cheap seed jewelry on tables. They sold worry beads and leather and painted ashtrays. In the fall the ships slowed down and the tables disappeared. Everyone left on the island lived on their summer earnings, or on nothing at all, on the graciousness of more fortunate friends.

That afternoon, Christophile and I walked the road along the Paroikia beach. I stopped in a shop to buy some postcards with pictures of the island in the summertime. The water brilliant azure, a cupful of dye.

A woman in black stopped us in the lanes. She held Christophile's arm, touched her belly.

"The father is from Sparti," I said. The woman shook her head and said something to Christophile in Greek that I didn't understand. She walked slowly away from us.

"What did she say?" I asked.

"He will fight me," she said. "He will be out of my hands." When we passed the church she crossed herself, lifting her elbows to circumvent him.

At night, sometimes, I imagined how the hotel might have been once. Tourists from all over Europe, honeymooners on the balcony drinking instant coffee and marveling over the goats, the rolling hills, the wooden steeples, the landfill. I imagined that if I had come to that other Greece, I would have found something important.

In early April I heard a loud shuffling on the stairs outside my room. I opened the door. Christophile was standing in the hall. "I don't want it anymore," she said. The bee box was behind her.

"Christophile—" I started, but she lifted it and dragged it inside.

She smiled widely at me. "One day," she said, "you might need it." She lay her palm on the rough wood. "Thanos can build me a new one," she added.

She left it in the corner of my apartment. I set my blank postcards on top of it, pictures of a beautiful summer island, those lies.

Two days later I sat with Christophile down by the water, outside the Meltemi café. There were two or three old men inside, smoking, clicking their beads. A tiny, square television sat on the counter—the news broadcast, threaded with static. A child's

body facedown in a ditch, a woman running from a tattoo of gunfire, her arms up around her head. In front of the National Library someone was burning a heap of books.

The bartender brought us dusty cans of cola. He spoke to Christophile and she smiled. She kept her hands over her stomach. I looked out at the empty Aegean.

"My father is sending me back to Sparti," Christophile said suddenly. "My grandmother is there. There is no Thanos."

"Christophile," I said. I wanted to say something important, to let her know I understood, though I didn't. I thought of how my parents had smiled when I told them I was leaving, because they knew I wanted them to. "You have to live your life," my mother said. She looked around the kitchen. "You have to live your life," she said again.

"I leave tomorrow," she said.

All over the news, Baghdad was still burning. Something that wasn't even Baghdad anymore.

In late April the sun came out and stayed. I opened the balcony doors and swept the dirt out. I let it fall into the field below. The goats were nudging their young out into the light. Their legs wobbled in the mud; they tilted their heads toward the new sky.

Without Christophile, the rooms were silent, filled with dust and light. She had left the figurine of the cat on her windowsill and her bee box in my corner. These seemed like the only things to show she'd been there at all.

One warm morning, I noticed people I'd never seen on the road, one after another, picking their way toward town over the rutted roads, leading mules or carrying empty sacks. I followed them to the shore.

We put the island back together, piece by piece, raking the sand flat, moving tires and fishing nets and empty cargo crates into piles at the foot of the ruined monastery. Two men heaved it all into the back of truck and drove it slowly up toward the landfill, another winter of plastic bags and broken glass glinting on the hillside.

A man I recognized from the bakery stood near me, winding fishing line from his elbow to the crook of his hand. "Where is the girl?" he asked.

"Sparti," I said. "Her husband is there. She's having a baby." The man nodded and went on winding the line.

A group of six or seven boys from Nassau were trying to stand on their heads in the dark sand. I thought of Christophile in Sparti, spitting on the baby to bring him good health because the world is dangerous, riddled with nails, loose bricks, angry dogs. His tiny, reaching hands, his language of indistinct cravings.

What did I imagine? That she had lived alone in that hotel, afraid to tell anyone about the baby. Or that someone had brought her there, some other, angrier Thanos, and she was proud.

Outside the Meltemi café, the day she told me she was leaving, I hugged her and put my hands on her stomach. I wanted to feel something. The dream of a body, testing the sides, assembling its pieces. "You are not a *halfhearted* friend," she said. "You are *deciduous*." I smiled and we walked home in a weak sunlight. A marble cross had been raised above Vangellis's grave, just up from the blue lip of the sea. I knew that winter was over.

It was hot on Easter, with a warm wind. Sand blew in the air like gauze. The bars were filled with old men smoking, dice hitting the backgammon board. "Eh!" one of them called, and clicked his teeth at me. "Eh! I be your wife?" He smiled and threw the dice.

I followed the crowd toward the church, up from the port where Christophile and I had said goodbye. We passed the gutted ruins of shops lost to floods. The white light of a firecracker, the spray of sparks. In eight months I would leave the island, with the war still on, and the swastika on the hill a dark bird against the blue sky. The only time I would hear from Christophile again was when a box would arrive two years later, postmarked from the island—not Sparti. Inside I'd find a gray-white stone and a note. *The baby,* she would write, *calls this a seashell. He stands and listens. He speaks all day and night.*

The crowd spun around me as we walked toward the shoreline, toward the church with the ruined bell tower. It had grown dark. Six or seven women stood on a pile of rubble like a choir on risers, singing words I didn't recognize. All around me were their voices, and further on, the lights of a boat. I stood watching it and the lights were like the lights of some other city. My mouth was full of wind. I watched it moving through the water, another place so far away.

THE CREEK

They stood together at the steel sink in the corner of the cook shelter, brushing their teeth. The butt of the flashlight was balanced next to the soap dish, the dirt-streaked bar of Ivory. It smelled like cast iron and tin foil. Above them the split beams of the roof were gauzed with spider webs.

Marta spit toothpaste into the basin. "You have big boobs," she said.

Laura felt her face get hot. "So?" she said. She felt a sting behind her eyes. She rinsed her mouth, crossed her arms over her chest. The water tasted like rust.

"So you're big for your age. I bet guys love that," Marta said. She rinsed her toothbrush and picked up the flashlight, swinging her arm so that light arced across the beams.

Laura didn't say anything. She felt grateful for the dark, that Marta couldn't see her face. She wanted to go back to the cabin.

"Have you ever been kissed?" Marta asked.

Laura thought about walking away but that would be worse; then Marta would know that she hadn't. Finally she said, "Oh, sure."

"Who was it?"

She wanted to cry. "Oh, just some guy," she said. "It was no big deal. A couple guys, actually."

The flashlight lit Marta's face from underneath. The shadow of one eyebrow was raised. "Must not have been very good, then," she said. "Maybe I should show you how."

Laura's heart beat faster. Marta grabbed her hand but she didn't kiss her, just pulled her back toward the cabin. Sometimes, when they were alone, Laura thought about saying, *Maybe you could show me now*, but every time she was too scared, or Marta started talking, or some other girl showed up and the moment was ruined.

Laura's mother came to take her home on a Tuesday in August. Her shoulders were tight with sunburn and there was a swim rash between her thighs. She closed her eyes the whole trip home while her mother talked nervously: *Did you ever send your grandmother a postcard—you should have worn sunscreen—tell me that you missed me.*

She didn't miss her. She leaned her cheek against the cold window glass. It felt like they were driving away from summer. She thought of the dark lake where the reeds moved slowly underwater, curling up from the loam. If you stood at the shoreline when everyone was lining up for dinner you could hear the grace rolling down from the mess hall, *Back of the bread is the flour, back of the flour is the mill*. She had lost track of the days, and now the summer was over. *Back of the mill is the wind and the rain.* It bothered her how time could slip, how inexact it all was.

Her mother steered the truck down the gravel driveway. The house was a double-wide mobile with off-white siding and a dented screen door, picked out of a catalog because it had wood paneling and avocado shag. It was set against the edge of a steep slope. On the other side of the drop was a creek, lined with trees and slow with mud. Laura rarely climbed down to it; when she was little her mother had been terrified she would tumble down the slope, or, if she were to make it, that she might fall into the shallow water. It had thrilled Laura to imagine it: her mother hysterical; police dogs

dragging their noses along the creek bed; the lit windows of the house glowing like searchlights.

They had always lived here. It was more familiar to her than anything she'd known—the wood stove, the cat that brought mice dead to the door, the barbed wire of the fallen fence. Stacks of firewood swayed on the sinking porch. The pits dropped from the cherry tree split with frost, refusing to take. She used to like it—the nights when the dark was so thick she couldn't see where the yard dropped away to the creek. When the house arrived, in halves on the back of a truck, the workers set it down too close to the edge. This fact used to amuse her. Now, pulling her duffel bag from the cab of the truck, she saw it for what it was: inconvenient, foolish, a mistake that should have long been fixed.

The phone didn't ring that night. She imagined Marta at the kitchen table with her parents, her shoulders slumped forward. Imagined her sitting on her bed, knees drawn up, one hand scratching an ankle. She always had bracelets of mosquito bites.

Marta had a boyfriend—she showed Laura a picture one day, while they sat together on Marta's bunk. The rubber mattress made the back of Laura's legs sweat. The boyfriend was fifteen—two years older, which Marta said was a good amount—tall, wearing a Yankees cap over hair gone dark with grease. "He's going to be a mechanic," she said. "He already rebuilt a car. A Cadillac. He got it from his grandfather."

The boyfriend sent Marta a single card in the eight weeks that she was away. On the front there was a picture of two birds, their wings beating in front of a pink heart. On

the inside he wrote, *Hope you are having fun at camp, have fun babe, sorry I don't write much.*

Laura hadn't thought much of the boyfriend. By the end of the summer Marta had stopped talking about him entirely; he existed to Laura as only a small irritation, something to worry and pick at when she was bored, like a hangnail.

But now—she wondered if they were together, sitting on the leather front seat of the Cadillac. His rough stupid hand on her thigh.

Laura sat at the table, waiting for the phone. *We'll have to keep in touch,* Marta had said. *I'll call you for sure.* At the table Laura's mother read a magazine, licking one finger to flip the pages, breathing noisily.

A week after she got home, there was a movie on television, about two elderly women who lived together. They held each other's papery, translucent hands.

"Hmph," said her mother. "They put this on television."

"It's a good movie," Laura said.

"You shouldn't be watching this," her mother said. "Isn't there something else on?"

"I want to watch it," she said.

"It's about lesbians. Turn it to *Match Game."*

"Maybe I'm a lesbian."

Her mother turned. "Don't even make jokes," she said. "That's not funny."

Rain on the roof of the cabin; heat between her legs; the pale moon of Marta's face in the cook shelter. She imagined Marta with the boy in the baseball cap, her hand

in his, his thumb rubbing a slow circle into her wrist. Imagined standing over him, kicking him in the ribs, the throat, in his pimpled face until blood ribboned down his lips and over his chin.

By the end of August there was still no call. The fall was coming early; wood smoke, a chill in the air. Two of the other girls from camp called, putting her on three-way. They were giggling; one of them, the one with the horsy face, kept saying, *Remember when we had the food fight?* She didn't care about the food fight. The call was all the worse because she had nothing to compare it to: she couldn't say, *When Marta and I talk, we talk about more interesting things.*

In her room Laura undressed in front of the mirror. There were still lines where her bathing suit had been, though she hadn't been swimming since she left Camp River Ranch. Her hips were too wide, she thought. Her calves were thick, her shoulders bowed. An ugly body. She was glad Marta had never seen her naked. Not that it mattered now. Not, she thought, that it'd ever mattered.

She put her clothes back on. In the living room her mother was sitting on the sofa, watching an afternoon game show. Laura looked at her. Her mother's hips were wide, too. Of course.

"Why do you watch these stupid shows?" Laura asked. "The prizes aren't even that good. Who wants a new kitchen table?"

"I wouldn't mind," her mother said.

"No, thanks."

"You're certainly in a mood." Her mother kept looking at the screen. It flashed to a commercial for a pain reliever. "What are you so bum about?"

"I hate it here," Laura said. "I wish I'd never come home at all."

She kicked the wall, hard. The rubber of her shoe left a dark mark on the wall that her mother had just papered.

"What a dump," she said. "I hate this ugly house."

Her mother didn't say anything, just stared hard at the rubber mark her shoe had left. It made Laura angry, a red heat behind her eyes, sparking down her arms and legs. *Say something*, she thought. When her mother stayed silent she let one hand fly out and bang the wall.

"And I hate *you*," she said. "This house is ugly, and you're ugly, and I can't wait until I never have to see it *again*!"

She ran to her room, slammed the door and pushed a chair in front of it. She climbed into bed. The wool blanket was rough on her face but it deadened the sound until she could almost believe she was underwater, floating in the green of the lake.

She slept through dinner and then she couldn't sleep that night. She was hungry. There was an ache in her chest that felt rock hard, like it might never go away. She thought of the boyfriend leaning over the hood of the Cadillac. Of Marta, pulling the burnt skin from a marshmallow, holding the raw center back in the flames until it was just a coal-black lump.

She climbed out of bed. The weight in her chest was still there, heavy and permanent-feeling. She felt her way down the narrow hall.

There was a small noise from the kitchen. Her mother was standing in the dark in front of the stove.

She turned and looked at Laura. "Go back to bed," she said. Her voice was thick, as though she'd been crying. And then, "I can't bear your getting older. Boys coming around."

Laura didn't say anything. She stared into the dark. There wasn't any sound, just the press of the house against the slope. She thought of the creek down there, how dark it was, and moving fast.

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HOW TO GET DOWN

Wait for Uncle Rat for days, even though he is always a week late. Look out the front window at the dirt road. Post your little brother on the porch steps as a sentinel, a soldier. Tell him to call if he hears a car. When it begins to rain, watch with satisfaction as he stares straight ahead, the rain dripping from his hair.

Wait to see who Uncle Rat will bring along. Last year it was a woman named Donna, and her teenage twin boys. They had half moons of acne on their jaws. You made your little brother hold your hand and said loudly, "Jeez, you have to be my shadow." When he tried to pull away, you held his hand tighter. The boys draped their arms and legs over the furniture. They drank sodas quickly, one after another.

Finally, when you've just decided that Uncle Rat won't be coming at all, hear the trailer rattling down the dirt road. Run to your mother. Cry, "He's here!" and then hide in your room, so that Uncle Rat won't know you have been waiting.

When everyone else has gone outside, follow slowly behind. Hold a book in one hand, so that Uncle Rat can see that you are busy. Watch him step out of the trailer, alone, and kiss your mother on the cheek. He has grown a beard, and he is carrying a beer. When he sees you, smile your school picture smile.

To his face, call your Uncle "Raph," because everyone does. Understand that your mother and father hate Uncle Rat at the same time that they love him and are jealous of him. Think of Tessie McPhee in your class at school, who you hate for being, at seven years old, beautiful and aloof. Think with shame about the time you showed her an

eraser shaped like an ice cream cone, because you wanted her to like you. This is how your mother and father are about Uncle Rat.

All night, listen through the thin walls to your mother and father and Uncle Rat, drinking in the kitchen. Hear him say, "Once a year, I have to come back here and show you how to get down." Listen to the sound of ice rattling. Listen to your mother laugh in a new, different way. Later, there will be a loud crash. Bite the inside of your mouth. Do not run to the kitchen. Instead, wake up your brother. Tell him he shouldn't be scared. Sleep curled around him, your body like a comma.

In the morning, Uncle Rat will say, "My tongue has got a headache," but then he will pour cocktails for your parents. Look away from your father when he stumbles. Inspect a soda can full of cigarette butts. Wait until afternoon, when everyone is smiling again, and bring Uncle Rat a picture you have drawn. Shrug humbly when he whistles long and low. Ask him to tell you about the campground, which is where Uncle Rat lives during the rest of the year. Think of Uncle Rat's life as one long camping trip. Ask him if he gets tired of roasting marshmallows. Take a sip of his beer when he isn't looking.

After a week, Uncle Rat will start trying to earn his keep. Drive with him in the trailer to town, early in the morning, when your mother says it's okay. Sit on the boxes of liquor all the way home. Help him try to fix the screen door of the house, which is hanging at a rickety slant. When he starts to curse, go inside and find your brother. Take him down to the creek and fill an empty bottle with creek water. Take turns drinking from it and falling down between the trees. Later, when you notice the screen door is gone, say nothing.

When Uncle Rat says he figures he'll be heading out soon, feel happy and sad. Stay outside for most of the day, and try not to look at your mother and father. Give your brother a bath. Think of how grateful everyone will be that you have remembered. Brush his hair and lead him past your parents in a towel. Bring them more ice for their drinks. Don't ask about going to the library. Don't ask if you can watch the television. Eat whatever you like, straight from the cupboards.

When Uncle Rat leaves, your father will prowl around for a few days. He and your mother will finish all of the liquor in the house, in one night. Expect this, and avoid them. The next day, they will clear out the bottles and lie on the sofa, sipping ginger ale. Fashion your father a bracelet of maple leaves that will fall to the ground when he tries to slip it over his wrist. Don't pick it up. Instead, sit outside on the steps of the shed and watch the space where Uncle Rat's trailer used to be. Be as quiet as you can.

Later, realize that no matter what life you have, there will be another that is more appealing. Understand that your parents are saddled with you and your brother, and they will always be. Understand that in a certain way, they hate you for this.

After Uncle Rat leaves, spend hours with your brother, sitting in an old rowboat that has been abandoned in the woods. Stare at your brother. Push berries into his bow-shaped mouth. Imagine they are poison, and that when he dies, you will finally be free. You will finally have the whole wide world.

THE PIG YEAR

All that year I was afraid of things. The screens were torn and the house was full of flies. My brother was only five but he could catch flies with his bare hand. The cat left a squirrel twitching on the kitchen floor and mushrooms pushed up the carpet in the back room. A raccoon let himself lazily in the front door. My father disappeared often into the woods and no one followed him or spoke of his absence. He came back smelling differently and that scared me too, to think of what he might be doing under those shadowy trees. It seemed like the outside was always trying to get in and in the dark I imagined killers and thieves tapping at the windows.

The land behind the house was leveled to pasture and my missing pogo stick resurfaced in the new bare field, rusty and threaded with weeds. My father came home with the pig in the back of the truck. He was big, with thick bristles along his spine, and he scratched his back against the barbed wire. I wouldn't touch him.

The pig kept rooting under the fence, and my father kept rebuilding it. I had obsessions, strange compulsive behaviors. I licked my palms and refused to speak in school. I kept a piece of bacon on the windowsill, to warn the pig to stay away. When the shed was painted, two dark coats and the door a dark socket, I refused to walk past it. It was the year that the Freedom County rallies began. The Freedom County Boys came around with papers that my mother and father refused to sign. They wanted to secede from Snohomish County, to be sovereign. *You cannot go onto anyone else's land,* my mother said. *Promise me. It's not safe.*

The more she watched us, the more my brother and I wanted to go into the woods, across the property lines that were deep in fireweed and salal. In spring, when the brush was thick, we followed the creek until it ended at a pile of trash. I thought it must have something to do with the Freedom Boys. We opened one of the trash bags and things came spilling out—eggshells, torn paper, orange peels. My brother held up a broken wicker basket. It had plastic eyes and was made to look like an owl. We brought it home and kept it hidden under the bed. I thought we might be caught and so I took it back out, walked to the edge of the woods and threw it as far as I could.

In summer the pig broke loose again and so we called the butcher, who drove out in a refrigerated truck and shot the pig between the eyes. The freezer was full of white paper packages. My father kept the pig's lungs in our picnic cooler. He threaded a tube into them and blew into it, to show us how we breathe. They made my brother sick. I fed him milk and wanted to be good, to do right, *I want to be right,* I said. My mother said, *Not all the time.* The lungs smelled even in their suit of insulation. My brother held his stomach.

At night I lay awake and listened to my parents talking.

If the county secedes, my mother said, *we have to leave.*

My father said, *They won't.*

I'm going to say my piece, my mother said.

I was afraid. I imagined the Freedom County Boys as a militia surrounding the house. I imagined their rifles. *They don't believe in rules,* my mother said. *They want to be able to carry their guns around and shoot anything that touches their land.* All day

long I heard the tattoo of target practice. Soon summer would be over and I didn't want to leave my brother alone while I took the long bus ride to school.

One day in late August, my mother brought my brother and me with her to a Freedom meeting. She was going to say her piece while we played in the dirt yard with the other children. I wondered how many of them had held rifles.

The meeting seemed to last a long time. I was worried about my mother. I told the others about the pig, about the lungs and how they breathed by themselves. One boy cried. Then my mother was on the porch, and someone behind her was yelling something but I didn't hear. *Let's go,* she said, and tapped me twice, pulled my arm, said *Now*, but I was kneeling with my brother beside the boy, scratching the dirt, saying low, low, *Listen, you can hear the hooves, listen.*

BRIEF SCENES FROM A NOVEL-IN-PROGRESS

Premise:

Jackson is a seventeen-year-old boy who lives with his parents and sister in a small town in northern Washington state. His father is abusive to his mother, and after an assault she takes the children and leaves. Jackson, resentful of the move, tells his father where his mother is. Forced to choose between her safety and her son, she relocates alone with her daughter. Jackson eventually becomes estranged from his father and lives for a while on the streets in Portland, working as an escort for an older man.

After a few months, his caseworker gives him a contact for a job in Tolt, a town in northern Washington where the river has been rerouted after a flood. Aimless, he moves out to Tolt and begins work. The novel centers around his affair with Don, an older, married man and his project manager on the crew. The following are some scenes from the first half of the novel.

*

Jackson dyed his mother's hair in the sink of the motel. She'd always been a brunette. As a blonde she looked like someone else's mother.

She combed it out in front of the mirror, watching herself. Jackson sat behind her on the arm of a chair. She caught his eyes above the sink. "Do you like it?" she asked. The stitches were a train track from her eyebrow to her cheek.

Lydia was on one of the double beds, on the paisley bedspread, vinyl-covered batting. "I like it," she said. "You look pretty, Mom."

Jackson didn't say anything. He stood up. "I'm going out," he said.

"Jackson—" She turned from the mirror and looked at him. There were narrow rows in her hair from the comb. She sighed. "You be careful."

"I do," he said.

The motel was on the ground floor, a shitty pay-by-the-week place. Jackson in one bed, Lydia and his mother in the other, watching daytime television and eating hamburgers from the Burger King across the parking lot.

Jackson took a left on the street and began walking. He had half of a cigarette in his pocket and he lit it. Marysville was a little valley town. The hills rose up on either side. To the west was the Sound, and to the east more farmland and a dozen new housing developments. He stood for a minute on the gravel outside the Burger King and watched the constellation of their lights.

They'd left the house four days before, when Jackson's father pushed his mother through the front window. They'd left four times already. Twice in cabs paid for to motels paid for by VOA, where a woman ten years younger than his mother came and spread her sheaves of paperwork on the desk: *I will not disclose my location. VOA will not disclose my location. I will join a support group. I will eat Ramen noodles and Hot Pockets and stare at daytime television because there is nothing else to do.*

Every time they went back home. When they loaded up the Civic and pulled into the drive his mother was tight as a wire each time. The longest they'd stayed away was three weeks. But this time was different. He could feel it.

*

By Sunday, by the time Jackson knocked on Eric's door, he felt like he might fall down, or worse, that Eric might send him away. He always felt that way, but this time was worse—his nose had been bleeding, off and on, and he hadn't been able to find an open bathroom to wash his face. "Come in," Eric called, and Jackson opened the door on a clean white hall with mirrored hangings on either wall. It reminded him of a woman's throat, her glittering earrings.

Jackson went to the bathroom; Eric had left a towel, a new pair of underwear in Jackson's size, and white undershirt folded on the edge of the bath. On the counter was a bar of French-milled soap wrapped in the miller's ribbon.

He looked at himself in the mirror. He'd lost more weight, and his eyes were bloodshot. His hair was dirty but he kept it cut. There was another fag he knew who carried a pair of good scissors in his dirty duffel bag and he would always cut Jackson's hair for him. Still, he looked at shit. It disgusted him a little, knowing Eric would want to fuck him like this. He stood in the shower for a long time.

Eric was in the kitchen when Jackson came out of the bathroom. He was pouring wine and Randy Travis was playing. *On the Other Hand.* Jackson had a memory of Travis from nowhere, some record cover—his skinny sorrow, his melancholy eyes. All of Jackson's first loves were country singers or people he could imagine that way: wistful, tight jeans, drinking problems. Jackson's mother loved Randy Travis, but he remembered her fighting with his father over that same song, over the idea of someone being true and full of fidelity by not going to bed with someone at the last minute. "You can't spend the evening singing to another woman about her eyes and still tell yourself

you're acting married," she said, and even then, Jackson knew it was the kind of comment you make when you are the woman who is waiting at home.

"Randy Travis," said Jackson. "Since when?" Eric was a jazz guy. Was there anyone who really *liked* jazz?

"For my little Texan," Eric said. He handed Jackson a glass of wine that threatened to tip over its glass rim and onto the carpet. Eric wasn't a county singer, or even close. He was nearly sixty, big in a way that seemed natural, not bad-looking. But there was something about his money that made him ugly. In a restaurant he would send the entrees back and talk loudly about the waiter.

"Tell me how you've been," Eric said, laying one hand on Jackson's knee.

This was part of it—to pretend that Jackson had been living somewhere, with roommates, maybe. That he wasn't sleeping in the gutted house on 47th, or in the park, or on one of the free beds at Harry's Mother when the weather was bad. That he had money, and that Eric wasn't paying him.

It only bothered him when he really felt like shit—nights when he was at Harry's Mother, and he had to make another case plan, and eat their gutrot food, and listen to all of the fifteen-year-old runaways tell their war stories. Then, he thought, it didn't seem right. He didn't want Eric's money but it still didn't seem right. Once, Eric had given him a twelve hundred dollar watch, a Movado. Jackson tried to pawn it, but no one bought watches for anything close to what they were worth. He kept it, but he couldn't stand to wear it. There was something terrible about that watch.

*

Tolt from the window of the shuttle was about the ugliest place he'd ever seen. The buildings were squat and mildewing, roofs caved in. Storage containers, piles of junk. A dog picked over a pile of trash, his hide picked raw, no collar. Kids playing with shitty plastic toys in dirt yards. Everything looked unarranged, things knocked from the shelves, the bare foundations, the planks of new buildings.

The shuttle pulled up at the grocery store and he got out. There was a crate of pumpkins in a sodden cardboard corral, sunk down like heads. A bulletin board of handmade signs—*HoneyDo Handyman. Wanted: Samoid Dog Hair for Spinning, Will Pay.* A cart, abandoned with one busted wheel. Of all his mistakes, he thought, this one was the biggest. For a while in Portland he'd had it good, and now that flashed back with nostalgia that was like a long corridor he could look down, each door a different scene: Eric's bed, the sheets with a thread count higher than he'd known existed; the Willamette dotted with white sailboats; the streets as night, wet with rain, when he was inexplicably happy to be alone, in the dark, just walking.

He'd never done any labor in his life, really. He'd stolen money from his father, who blamed it on his mother. Once he'd stolen from her. A ten, even though he'd watched her fight for it—*the kids have been eating sugar packets and peanut butter,* she'd said, and it was true—but still he took it. Her father had peeled off a $10 bill. "I should go with you and see how you spend it," he said, but he kept his eyes straight ahead on the television, a game, something just beyond that lit-up field. Half of the time Jackson wanted to kill him. The other half he wanted to kill her—for fucking up, for

staying, while he and Lydia got sick and stupid. Lydia chewed the insides of her mouth until they bled, she washed her hands over and over again.

He looked around for the pay phone, to call the number Ida had given him. A mistake, he thought again.

The flood had hit the town six months ago. Jackson had sat at the library and looked up the pictures, the shaky videos. Unnailed carpeting, faucets running brown; county relief workers arrived in trucks with blankets, canned food, and whining, gulping pumps that drew water out of the hospital and the more important buildings downtown. The newspaper ran a grainy spread of ash-colored photographs: Three teenage girls on the hood of a Plymouth, water in the wheel well. A half-dozen boots floating upside down outside of the Longhorn bar. Living room furniture assembled on a front lawn. The south end reservoir, ocean-full.

After the flood, the county brought in civil engineers to reroute the river. The spirit of progress—contractors arrived in sleek black cars with portfolios of designs, and the river was shifted a mile east. The new lake would be studded with tony houses, a necklace of prime real estate. County and state relief funds had gone to rerouting the river and bailing out the people who'd been displaced. But the real changes were on the east side, the new lakeshore, where the future financial backbone of this little watery town, fifteen or twenty private investors, had backed the money to erect the new wing of houses. The money to bring in people like Jackson, who would work for cheap because they had no place else to go.

*

He had his face buried in Don's jacket when the fireworks started. The buttons against his cheek, the warm smell of sweat and struck matches. "Hey," Don said, and touched his hair. He slipped his fingers under Jackson's chin and tilted his face toward the sky. "Hey, Jack, you're missing it."

The Fourth of July. The lake was a silvery stage for the half-hearted display, dusty Roman candles and the smell of sulfur. They were nested in the dirt against the rusted-out ironworks. Don lifted Jackson's cheek from his jacket and toward the sky, the colored sparks and smoke. "You and me," Don said. They had a bottle of cheap wine that Don tipped up to his mouth. A shower of sparks lit his face in carnival pinks and blues.

Don handed the bottle to Jackson. "A sweet little boy, and a bottle of wine," Don said. "That's what it takes to make a honky-tonk time."

"Is that what it takes?" Jackson pushed his face against Don's neck.

"George Strait," said Don. "One of the greats."

It wasn't George Strait. It was Dwight Yoakim. Originally Johnny Horton, but Jackson let it go. Don's neck smelled like aftershave and cigarettes. It was the worst fireworks display Jackson had seen in his life. Three or four wilting rockets gave off an uneven spray of sparks. He remembered watching the fireworks in Portland last year, sitting on the waterfront with a gram and a fifth of gin. That all seemed very far away now.

Don kissed the palm of his hand, held his lips there. Jackson watched the smoke fall, drifting down like streamers from a party. It was beautiful, he thought. All of it was

beautiful because here they were, together. That old trick—love makes the world new. Trite conceits, sugary lies—and still. Always he had thought of his life as if it was waiting somewhere else, a party that he might finally arrive at, late, breathless, taking off his coat. It nagged at him, that maybe no one was waiting anywhere at all. But now—Don pushed Jackson's hand up under his shirt and held it there, against the broad plane of his chest. Across the dark surface of the lake he could see sparkers, dripping a bright, brief rain.

When the last stray fireworks had faded to smoke hanging over the lake, they made their way back to the truck, walking gingerly in the dark. Don drove them to A-Frame B, one of the model homes on the new edge of the lake. The plumbing wasn't in yet. There wasn't any insulation, just an airy crosshatch of bare beams. A little cathedral, Jackson thought. Something that is ours.

Don spread a sleeping bag on the wood floor and kneeled beside Jackson. He kissed him, rough stubble, wet tongue. Jackson grabbed Don's ass with his hands, dragged one hand up over his stomach. He unbuttoned Don's jeans and took his cock in his mouth. Outside he could hear the rush of kids out on the mud flats, the long flat creases left behind where the river had been lifted up and taken east. A bottle breaking, someone calling *Shit, you drink all the beer?* Don's hands tightened in his hair. "Oh, God," he kept saying. "Oh, God, Jackson." It sounded like he was crying. When he came he put both hands around Jackson's ears until he could hear a ringing. They fell back on the bed and lay there together.

"I don't ever want this to go away," Don said, a little breathless. His arms were tight around Jackson. It drove a quick, delicious pain in Jackson's heart. Don's wedding

ring was a narrow belt cutting into his fourth finger, worn so long that there was no way to slip it off.

Don had only taken him to his place once, when his wife was back in Burlington. It was work crew housing, mostly empty, except for the fan shape of movie magazines on the coffee table and twin closets stuffed with boxes, clothes slipping off their hangers. When Don went into the kitchen, Jackson took a necktie from a row of them that were looped over the closet rod. It was maroon and navy, striped diagonally. He put it in his pocket, just to be able to take something from that world and carry it back to the other.

*

The new dam was fresh wood and steel, shivering against the bowl of the lake. When he woke up in A-Frame B, Don was already gone, due at a job site a mile down the road. Jackson stood on the dock and lit a cigarette. In his jeans pocket was a note Don had left him: *Dear Picklepuss, I love you little, I love you mighty, I wish my pajamas were next to your nighty. Love, the squirt who is your pal and public enemy no. 1.* He unfolded the note and folded it again, then got into the Saab and drove around the lake to his site.

When he got to the site, one of the men gave him a hammer and had him pulling nails out of a stack of planks. Jackson was good at keeping to himself. In Tolt he had a steady paycheck and the cab of permanently parked fifth-wheel to stay in rent-free. It smelled like motor oil and there was sawdust and mud from his boots scattered across the metal floor, but it was a door and a room and bed, and it was free. He'd saved enough to

buy a little white 1989 Saab with more miles on it than he thought was possible for a car that still ran. He followed orders, and tried not to think about Don. He wasn't stupid enough to think that they were going to run off together. He wasn't stupid enough to believe that Don could just walk away from his wife. There were papers, furniture, trappings. Heavy things. He imagined a wedding ring alone could be heavy enough to hold you down.

Most days, Don would come around to the job site in the afternoon. He was likeable. Everyone loved Don. A man's man. Jackson had said that to him once, in bed, and Don had laughed, and Jackson had pinned him down on the shitty mattress. "That's what you are," Jackson said, and Don laughed. It was July. The kids in town ran their bikes up and down the mounds of dirt that collected outside the job sites, eating canned sardines and drinking generic soda that had come in on the food relief pallets.

Ruin was still on the town, an inescapable mark. When the floodwater receded, houses slid off the granite squares of their foundations. Armchairs and mattresses ballooning with mud and leaves were dragged out with winches by a few workhorse pickups. The smell of rot, wet wool, damp upholstery. Silverfish and mold. A litter of wild dogs, displaced by the flood, ran in and out of the woods, through the allies in town. In the absence of more certain landmarks, birds flew woozily into the windows of the new houses. Crushed feathers, broken necks. One morning in one of the new work sites Jackson stood in the empty house frame while the wind whipped through, watery and sharp-smelling. One of the carpenters had left his lunch sitting in a paper sack on top of a sawhorse. When Jackson turned around one of the stray dogs was there, rangy and skittish, eating the sandwich in choking bites.

That was one thing that bothered him about the new lake—on the surface, it seemed like a kind of forgiveness, to make newness and beauty out of the splintered wreckage of the old dam, the watermarked town. An offering of grace to undo the rust, the walls stripped to tarpaper, the trout in the wine cellar. But at the same time, wasn't it a falsehood, to think you could just move an entire river, make a new lake, and everything would fall into place? The dog had finished the sandwich and stood there shaking, tonguing up crumbs. His fur was matted. He looked at Jackson with hungry, lost eyes.

*

Don was as close to blueblood at Jackson could imagine. Food in the fridge. Comfortable suburban cotton batting. The strange asexuality of it—but it drove an ache down deep in Jackson's stomach to imagine Don in that forest glen of cul-de-sac, wood nymph, thirteen and his cock pressing up against the Nordstrom's sheets, $69.99 for a set—and why? For the aunt of better breeding who came there once a year? The neighbors with their collection of cuckoo clocks? The dog whose paws they would wipe down before he set foot on the eggshell rugs?

The curious mix of finery and frump fixated Jackson—the ball games, the logo-ed sweatshirt masculinity that drank in chain restaurants, coveted women with tiny shoes and flat-ironed blonde hair, chubby thighs, the low tier sorority girls. Nothing to aspire to, and yet, it seemed, they *did.* They *had.* And what of it? Jackson thought: my mother, lying beside a hank of her own hair, her own blood-beaded scalp, cheek against

the nail-studded floorboard of the industrial garage, her tits coming out of her torn t-shirt—had they done any better?

Don kept pacing back and forth. "I can't take it," he said. "I love you! Eliza doesn't understand! How could she?"

His father might have said those words to the woman in the blue dress. To his mother. It was all lies—all cake, none of the just desserts. Those who hate the soup get seconds.

Don knelt down. "I love you," he said again.

Bullshit, Jackson thought, you say whatever you want and you're still with her tonight, smelling like baby powder and detergent and collared sweatshirts, sitting with the sports channel, your jizzed-up sport socks in the back of the closet, while she blowdries her hair. He wanted to know and equally feared the most graphic of questions—do you eat her out? And worse—do you hold her? Spend all day in bed on Sundays? Her morning cough, her bottom lip?

*

He went to the Longhorn, where he knew he could get a drink without anyone asking his age. The Longhorn was one of the only bars in Tolt and clearly the best. During the flood and the subsequent weeks, everyone gathered there to drink and take a breathless inventory—what had gone missing, what had been lost.

The air of the bar hit him, a hot breath of liquor and cigarette smoke. He didn't go to bars often, mostly because of his age but also because the people there seemed to be

able to see it on him, the difference. In a little bar in Kelso he'd managed to get a drink, but in the first half hour someone had called him a faggot and he'd had to leave out the back. Here, no one gave him a second glance.

He looked different, too. He looked like part of the work crew, and he had some muscles for the first time since a season he spent running cross-country, mostly to get out of the house and because then he was still doing anything he could to fill his days, to pack whatever he could around the dull, creeping sense that there was something about him that was different. He remembered an unreasonable fear of the clammy, tiled locker room; the strips of muscle that ran down the inside curve of some boy's perfect hips; those wispy, ephemeral running shorts. He sometimes thought of the years in Marysville, in his parent's house, as a series of grisly snapshots: Jackson fourteen, deeply shy, caught in the back of a school van with the effeminate swim coach. He father, throwing a glass that shatters beside his mother's head. A senior at the high school fractures Jackson's cheekbone in the empty locker room because Jackson is rumored to have been watching him change. His mother drinks too much and passed out in the driveway. The gravel makes a pattern on her cheek. In the days surrounding the divorce, Jackson shoved enough coke up his nose to start sneezing a buckshot pattern of blood into his own cupped hands. He chewed his lips until they bled and started missing school. He remembered his father pulling him aside at home and saying, *You can't buck city hall, son. Don't try to buck city hall.*

The Longhorn bartender brought over another beer, bought for him by someone he recognized vaguely from the work crew. He picked it up and tilted it briefly toward

the man at the bar. All of these fine lines—friendly and drunk in Tolt was a world away from friendly and drunk in Vaseline Alley or on Capital Hill.

He was getting drunk. He needed to remember to get food stamps. He finished that beer and ordered another.

He felt boozy and warm in the dim light. The table was a round of wood on top of a barrel. The surface was pocked and scarred: *Hot Girlz; Bills a pussy; I Luv Randy 4Ever 4Realz.* He was feeling a kinship to everything around him, to this little town where he'd landed. The drying lakebed to the west, studded with lost things—flip-flops, sunglasses, engagement rings. The new lake to the east, clean and full of promise. And Don, his Don, who would be the first real life that Jackson had ever had.

He took the bottle and drank it all. He fished around in the pockets of his winter coat with the halfway hope of digging up an old baggie that he could scrape a line out of. He knew the pockets were empty but he checked anyway. Nothing. The lining had worn through and his hand slipped into the batting.

The Longhorn was a half a mile from Don's trailer, and he started walking there. He liked the idea of watching Don from a distance, of seeing him for the first time. The way you might enter a party and see the person you love lit up from across the room, completely absorbed in everyone but you. The back windows—the bedroom, he thought—were dark when he walked up, but he could see a glow around the side and he hung back in the underbrush, making sure that he wasn't in the light.

He walked quietly around to the front of the house, where the kitchen and living room lights, in a neat row of windows, were blazing. The kitchen was bright and empty, the counters bare except for an open wine bottle. The living room window was a shade

dimmer. The outline of a table lamp, the faint sound of music. He stood just outside of the line of light. There was a stand of weeds and he tripped for a minute, then caught his balance and moved closer.

*

The air in the truck was stale. The cup holders were stacked with a half-dozen nested paper coffee cups. Jackson kicked aside fast-food bags and empty cigarette packs. His back was wet with sweat.

Don didn't say anything until they were out of sight of the crew, then he reached over and squeezed the back of Jackson's neck. He angled the truck down a spur road off toward the ironworks. No one went out that way, since the flood sent creeping red rust over everything. Even before then the ironworks felt dangerous; the year before, a boy from town climbed the old blast furnace and fell.

"They don't need me on the west side?" Jackson asked.

"I'm leaving Eliza," Don said. "She's leaving tonight. I told her and she's leaving tonight. I need a few days and then you can come stay. Or hell, we'll rent a room. Together." He put one hand on Jackson's thigh.

"You told her about me?" Jackson pictured a blonde woman, dark alleys of mascara, suitcases. Ordinary devastation, all of the specters.

Don nodded. He looked away. "I want to do this right for you, Jack," he said. "You deserve it." He looked over at Jackson and smiled. His front teeth had a tiny gap in them. He was thirty-four years old but that gap made him look like a little boy.

The happy ending, the exposed secret. Vindication and champagne and roses. Jackson smiled back. He wanted to laugh, to open the car windows, to shout something. *This is my boyfriend.* What was he, twelve? He took a breath. Slow, he thought. Go slowly. "Are you okay?" he asked. He understood that this was tricky. That you couldn't slip from one person to another like so many coats. Sometimes, he still woke up feeling dread like a heavy blanket, hearing the tattoo of the spray from the lawn sprinkler hitting the window, and downstairs his mother crying, his father shouting. Time could slip that way.

"I'm fine," Don said. He slid one hand from Jackson's shoulder down to his ass, into the waistband of his jeans. His warm hand on Jackson's ass. "You and me, Jack?"

"You and me," Jackson said. A flash, just a flash, of what it would be like: asleep on the sofa together at night, the television blinking blue, Don's head on his chest.

"I'll call you soon," Don said. He leaned across the front seat and kissed Jackson hard, pulled him close for a minute and breathed into his hair. Then Jackson slid back over to his side of the cab and they drove back to the job site. The cracked plastic seat yawned a chaste distance between them.

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In the days that followed certain dreams that he woke from had the same kind of sadness—nothing he could mourn, not really, because it was already gone. It had never existed in the first place. He worked with a focus. It felt good, to put things in order.

Don avoided the job site for three or four days. Jackson wondered if he was coming back at all, and then, that Friday, the pickup pulled up and Don climbed out. He

wandered through, talking to the rest of the crew, shuffling papers on his plastic clipboard. Jackson felt an ache somewhere in the bottom of his stomach, in his testicles.

Don walked toward him. Those hands, long fingers with broad nails and deep creases in the palms. The lines around his eyes. The first night that they had slept together, on the floor of A-Frame Model B, the lake cast trails of light on the bare wood floor. Jackson woke with his heart pounding and the taste of old bourbon in his mouth, a cold fear in his stomach at what they'd done, what it meant for his job and his life, but Don just pulled him closer and touched his face, kissed his hair.

"Jack," Don said. He smelled like good sweat and new wood. "How are things?" The boom of his work voice. It used to make Jackson want badly to fuck him, to stand there talking about work orders and storm windows. To know that in a few hours those long hands would be on his cock, his teeth on the pale skin of Don's shoulder.

"Jackson," Don said. "You've been doing some good work here."

"Fuck you."

"Jack," he said. He looked at Jackson. He held his arm out as though he was going to reach out and touch him, then let it drop. "Jack," he said, softly this time.

"What do you want?"

"Let me buy you a beer or something," Don said.

His mouth. His hands, with the rounds of callous on the pad of each finger. At night Jackson could hear the whine of his teeth grinding, feel the muscles in his calves twitching. All of those things that had made Don so alive, so real—and that had been the real miracle, that there was someone who he wanted, so badly, that was *real.* "You see, I would," Jackson said. He hated how his voice sounded, so high and bitter.

"So, do," said Don. There was an edge of authority in his voice. Jackson was aware of how everyone around him saw them: contractor and laborer. They probably imagined that Jackson had fucked up, of course he had. Late one too many times, some tragedy with the bent nails or the piles of sawdust. If they knew, he thought, they wouldn't see any of the real things—not Don turning in the cage of his arms, not the slow lap of the new lake against the dock pilings, not the spill of light through the frame of the house in the mornings. Just cheap, he thought. Cheap labor, cheap trick. Sleeping with the help.

Don cleared his throat. "Please?" he said.

Jackson looked at him. "No," he said. "I have to do something."

He turned around. "I could ruin you," Jackson said. "I could ruin you and your life would never be the same."

He walked out purposefully, toward the edge of the lake, the dark line where the fresh dirt ended and the forest resumed. He tried to walk as though he really had something to do—like what? he thought. Gather berries and skip rocks? Sit in the dirt and jerk off? He could feel Don watching him as he walked, faster and faster, the dust making small clouds behind him.

He felt a tightness in his throat and he knew he might cry. He hated it. He lit a cigarette and walked down to the edge of the lake, to look at the houses going up. He stood at the edge of the water and looked at the houses, the planes of glass still marked with storm tape. The old lake was gone, and this new one would take its place. He wanted to remember it like this. It seemed rare, to be able to see the moment when something changed.