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Liars Like Him

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On *Liars Like Him*

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This is a collection of short stories, which fall somewhere between the realist and absurdist genres of fiction. Most of them take place in or around Ohio. Birds and humans often appear side by side.

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If This Was What Adulthood Looked Like

Tim needed to distract himself from the grim reality of his loneliness. He'd just been dumped by a girl who was studying to be a physical therapist and could name every bone, muscle, and ligament in his shoulder complex. She had perfectly spaced hazel eyes and she was the only girl he'd ever slept with and she broke his fragile fucking heart.

It was just after his sophomore year of undergrad and most people were gone for the summer. No classes, no distractions. He took *Being and Nothingness* off his bookshelf, flipped it open, and landed on "The Existence of Others: The Problem." He flipped again and landed on "Second Attitude Toward Others: Indifference, Desire, Hate, Sadism." He looked out the window and saw a car parked at the curb and a put-together adult woman moving stuff into the recently vacated one-bedroom apartment below his. She looked like the type to be on the cover of a rock climbing magazine, hanging from a cliff by one hand in front of a streaked sunset and smiling at the beauty of *all this*.

A few shirtless guys were drinking on the front porch of the house across the street and watching her lift her heavy things. The guys' house was always creaking and moaning as if it were haunted by sexed-up ghosts who hung around to mock the dry spells of the living. They brought girls home from bars and the sounds of their urgent, boisterous sex floated through Tim's window at night. Tim looked like he played intramural soccer. He opened doors for people and listened more than he spoke. He was a catch, yet women went after guys like them.

The woman dropped a box of books in the grass and, through the open window, Tim heard one of the guys say, “That’s a lot of books,” and the rest laughed like assholes.

The woman hunched over the lawn to pick them up and said, “Dickheads.”

When she managed to get a swivel desk chair wedged halfway out the trunk of her sedan, wheels up, Tim walked down to help. He got the chair loose, then helped her carry the rest of her boxes inside. What a guy.

Her name was Jen and she was forty years old. She used to work in a chemistry lab in Austin, had hated it, and was going back to school to study interior design. No husband, no kids.

“Props on moving here by yourself,” Tim said. “My shrink once told me that moving is the third most stressful experience humans can have. Right behind death of a child and death of a family member.”

“Well, if the move gets too stressful, I can always kill my parents to distract me from the pain,” Jen said. “Like biting your lip when you get a shot.”

This was a state school where drunk frat guys pissed in the elevator of the twenty-four-hour engineering library as a rite of passage. When the weather was nice girls in bikinis sunbathed on the grassy commons area—“The Beach”—while professors rushed past, eyes averted. Adult students like Jen were rare and conspicuous. Tim once had a lady her age in a political science course and she’d use the word *wanderlust* every time she spoke in class. Younger students took note of this glaring repetition—*why didn’t she just wander her ancient ass straight to hell?*

Before he knew what he was doing, Tim offered to split Internet with Jen. How much bandwidth could she possibly use? She’d pay the bill on time and he’d have an ally

in the building. The other dozen units were filled with undergrads who ripped bongs on the second floor balcony, then vomited into the courtyard below.

"That is so great of you," Jen said. "Seriously. I really appreciate it." Her eyes were damp—probably just the stress of the move. "My ex used to make me pay a bigger chunk of our gas bill because I wanted the house warmer than he did."

"Not all of us are dickheads," Tim said. "The network is Euthyphro."

"What's that? How do you spell that?" She produced a memo pad.

"It's my favorite of Plato's Socratic Dialogues."

"Wow," she said. "Nerd alert."

"The password is winndixie. No caps, all one word."

"I'm not even gonna ask," she said.

Tim's only regular social engagements were coffee dates with his older sister Claire, who patiently listened to his rants about his fear that he'd never find someone. He wanted a good girl. Someone who was smart, funny, pretty, confident and tall-ish. "Is that really so much to ask?"

"Actually, yes," Claire said. But she was a loving, charitable sister and a lesbian. "Don't worry," she said. "If I meet a nice bisexual pixie who fits that description, I'll send her your way."

"A lady moved into the apartment below mine," he said. "Jen. She's forty." It was the first time in a long time that he'd entered the apartment of a nice woman who wasn't his sister. It was progress. He said, "Also we're sharing the Internet."

Claire grabbed his wrist and lifted his arm in the air like a boxing referee

declaring him the champ. She clanged her empty espresso glass on the table and shouted, “Ladies and gentlemen, I proudly present to you: the undisputed champion of whatever.”

She was pretty enough to get away with shit like this. She had short black hair and clear pale skin. Tim’s friends in high school had always drooled over her, even after she’d pull them into a close hug and whisper, “I like women.”

Tim threw his other arm up. Maybe it was just the triple shot, but he was feeling optimistic.

Tim and Jen split the bandwidth and the bill right down the middle, and she dropped a check through his mail slot once a month. Always a plain white envelope with his name written across it in beautifully feminine handwriting: a refined, confident cursive; no ditzy loops. He used the white space around his name for grocery and to-do lists.

The edges of their lives overlapped and he tried to be considerate. Whenever he swept outside his door, he swept all the way down the stairs and cleared Jen’s doormat, too. He began to think of her as a kind of teammate.

One night, he heard yelling from below. The guys across the street were leaving to hit the bars—there were elevators to be pissed in! They stood on the sidewalk holding beer cans and wearing heinous button-down shirts.

He saw Jen standing in front of her door, right below his window, and one of the guys hollered, “Hey girl. Wanna come out and get a drink with us?”

She said, “No, thanks. Have a good night,” but the guy kept yelling.

He grabbed his crotch and yelled, “Go fuck yourself.” His friends pushed him down the block, mouthing “sorry” over their shoulders.

Tim ran down and knocked on Jen's door. She cracked it and the golden sliding chain hung right beneath her teary eyes. "Are you okay?" he said.

"I'm fine," she said. "Just morons being morons."

"I'm so sorry. I hate those assholes," Tim said. "They lived there last year, too. Why don't we drink some beer and talk about how shitty people are?"

"I'm really okay. Just tired." She yawned for emphasis and glanced at her watch.

"It's eleven o'clock on a summer night. What else have you got to do? Besides, *I'm* the one who needs drinking therapy."

Jen's apartment was similar to his in layout, but nicer in every other way. It had newer carpet and fancy silver handles on the kitchen cabinets. Red throw pillows matched the red clock above the stove. If this was what adulthood looked like, he wanted in. Area rugs and end tables and several huge cases of beer, so she must have a Costco card. They got drunk on wholesale.

"So, Jen, what's your favorite color?" Tim said, only slurring a little. "If you were stranded on a desert island and could take only one color with you, what would it be?" he said.

Claire liked to ask questions like this when she was drunk. "Would you rather have fins for feet or gills on your neck? You can't have both." These questions were a way to gauge a person's character.

"I guess I'd bring red," Jen said. "Just in case the island had crappy sunsets or no red flowers." She looked tipsy and held her beer bottle up to the light.

Red was the color of royalty and passion and hearts. Dating a woman like Jen must be nice—eating fresh seafood and listening to the radio. There wouldn't be any

bullshit.

"Actually, I misspoke," Tim said. "I meant what *book*? What *book* would you bring?"

A week after their night of drinking, the buffer time on Tim's videos began to drag. The hourglass on his PC churned and churned; it took him six minutes to send an e-mail without attachments and Jen was the only possible explanation.

After three days of this, he pulled the plug on the router.

When Jen answered her door, she had dark bags under her eyes and the moon-faced look of someone who's emerged from the digital world to realize that the physical one still existed.

"Sorry to bother you," Tim said. "But the Internet has been really crappy lately and it finally just cut out on me. Are you having any problems?"

He looked over Jen's shoulder at her desktop, big and old like a control panel at NASA. Jen eased the door closed to block his view.

"Actually, mine cut out too," she said. "When I was checking my e-mail."

"Do you mind if I take a look?"

He sat down at her computer and a video was frozen there: three birds in a nest the size of a queen bed. They looked upset. Tim flicked through her tabs. There was also an osprey nest and a great blue heron nest. Both live feeds frozen. The osprey were lying face down as if they'd been shot execution style in the back of their little heads. The herons were mid-hop, all fighting for food from the giant mommy heron. Their long beaks looked sharp as daggers.

"I thought you were checking your e-mail?" Tim said. "Were these all streaming at once?"

Yes. All in HD. All at once.

"Okay," Tim said. "Here's the truth: I unplugged the router because you were taking up all of the Internet."

He'd never reprimanded an adult woman before. She stood before him looking timid, shocked and sorry. He imagined her kneeling in front of him and kissing down his chest, unzipping his jeans. He felt disgusting for thinking this.

"I'm sorry to be a jerk," he said, "but you really can't stream all this in HD at once."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"*One* nest is fine. But—I mean *three*?"

"I'll just watch one from now on," she said. "They're so fascinating. I'm addicted."

"It's fine," he said.

"But instead of lying and pretending that the Internet cut out, why not just tell me next time I piss you off?" Jen said. "We're both capable of handling conflict like adults, aren't we?"

All day, squawks and chirps echoed through Jen's vents and into his apartment. Tim walked from room to room and stepped in all the creakiest spots so that Jen would hear him pacing. For months he'd been tiptoeing around so as not to disturb her. Adorable. Maybe she'd set him up with a niece from Vermont.

Around midnight, he grabbed the bottle of white wine that had been sitting on top of his fridge for three months and he wiped off the dust. He put on cologne—one spritz, not overbearing. He knocked on Jen's door and waited. He held the bottle of wine by its neck, cool and casual. His hand was sweating so badly the bottle threatened to slip and shatter on her welcome mat. When she opened the door, he was clutching it to his chest with both hands.

"Jen. How's the Internet treating you?"

"All good," she said. "I'm sorry I snapped at you before."

"Me too," he said. "Listen. I've got this wine and I thought maybe we could watch the birds together. If you wouldn't mind the company."

She looked past him into the empty street. Looking for people who might see her sneak a younger guy into her love nest? He didn't want to be snuck in. He wanted her to yell so that everyone could hear: "MY GOD I THOUGHT YOU'D NEVER ASK."

"Come on in," she said at a normal volume. But with a smile. Good enough.

They dragged the couch in front of the computer screen and drank wine from wine glasses, flicking among the bald eagles, osprey, and great blue herons. The three nests were in different parts of the country and the live feeds were sponsored by a national conservation society. They settled on the great blue heron nest, where five one-month-old chicks had hatched. The babies were vicious and scaly: their dinosaur ancestry was undeniable. When a parent came home with a fish or a snake for them, the youngsters made terrible screeching noises. In fighting for food, they closed their long sharp bills around each other's skinny necks, which were thin and fleshy like umbilical cords. How did their heads not come off? What kind of birds was the mother raising these

babies to be? They ripped the fish to pieces and the sound of the kill made Jen's speakers buzz. She hardly blinked as she watched.

"You're loving this, huh?" Tim said.

"Absolutely. It's totally gross, but fascinating. They're not at the top of the food chain like we are."

"True. I don't know what it feels like to have my parents puke dinner into my mouth," Tim said.

"We've hardly lived," Jen said.

He wanted to mute the birds and kiss her in the bluish glow of the screen. He put a pillow on the couch between them, curled up, and felt the hairs on top of his head prickle—were they touching her leg, or just the pillow? He moved toward her in what he hoped were imperceptible increments. When he got up to leave, at two in the morning, Jen said she was glad that he came over and she'd love to do it again sometime. He went to hug her goodbye, she moved her head from side to side in a confusing way and Tim ended up kissing her cheek, right to the side of her lips.

When he got back to his apartment, he felt tipsy from the wine and the sickening sway of the herons' necks constantly moving like wheat in the wind. He lay in bed and thought of the great blue heron mother at the edge of the nest, slender and beautiful against the dark swamp stretching out below her. He wanted to lure a heron to the tiny fishpond in the courtyard, forgotten and mossy, so that Jen could see it up close. He'd bring nature to her doorstep—a grand pre-romantic gesture. He said aloud, in a bad English accent: "I shall have her. She shall be mine."

Really, the plan wasn't that outlandish. Great blue herons were abundant in central Ohio. They hunted on the banks of the Olentangy. Their silhouettes coasted over the expressway at dusk and their shit splattered in such quantities as to obscure entire windshields, like buckets of paint thrown by activists. They were there—the problem was luring one into the courtyard.

Tim began doing some research. Great blue herons eat fish, he learned. He watched a video of a woman who'd gotten all of her koi eaten by a blue heron. The video was filmed and narrated by the woman's daughter who said, "This is my crazy mom reacting to her fish getting killed by a bird," as her mother scrambled around a backyard pond yelling, "Sunny? Sunny?" Sunny had been a one-thousand-dollar golden koi.

That afternoon, Tim bought three koi fish and a fifteen-pound bag of birdseed. The fish were all injured and repulsive—fat, sparkly and gimpy. They were a bargain, and easy prey for a heron. And the birdseed would transform the courtyard into a place for all kinds of birds to congregate and socialize.

The fishpond was the size of a baby pool, with no decorative shrubs or rocks surrounding it. Tim scooped some algae from the surface with cupped hands and plopped the three new koi into the water. He tore a hole in the bag of birdseed and dragged it through the grass to leave a ring of bait around the pond. Everything was in place.

He knocked on Jen's door and said that he had a surprise for her. He covered her eyes and guided her to the pond. "Voila! I'm going to lure a blue heron for you and I bought some fish to use as bait," he said. "What do you think?"

Jen grabbed his arm to steady herself and leaned over the pond to see the fish

swimming in their crippled, floppy circles.

He slipped his hand into hers as gently as he could, so as not to startle her.

"I *love* it. How did I get so lucky as to move in below you?" She squeezed his hand. "I hope this works."

Over the next week, all kinds of smaller birds got their fill: pigeons, robins, bright red cardinals. Tim and Jen spent their days in the corner of the courtyard or sitting inside with their faces pressed to her sliding glass door. To keep their spirits up, they watched hours of the heron nest online and held hands as the first baby took flight over the swamp.

There were now more growing heron kids who needed nutrition to get big and strong like their daddies. Probability stated that a heron might appear any minute now. But what if a bird never showed? Tim started worrying. It was like he'd asked Jen to come on a road trip to some secret, mind-blowing destination, like a pretty waterfall, but then he'd gotten lost. And they were still driving.

"It'll happen," Jen said. "We just have to be patient." She pulled him into a hug against the brick wall.

It was as if she'd read his mind. He kissed her deeply. She was skilled. They put their foreheads together and stood with their eyes closed. He raked his fingers through her ponytail. He slid his hands into her back pockets. How had he come to want this woman? She'd probably been with a dozen men and loved at least a few of them. They probably had cars and careers and sex. Adult relationship things.

Mid-July. Summer almost over. Not a cloud in the fucking sky. Not a single heron.

Tim cancelled a lunch date with Claire. He said that he was exhausted from birdwatching—and, while he had her on the line, did she happen to know any ornithologists?

"Dear lord," she said. "Listen. You're coming to my place for dinner tonight and you're bringing this woman. It's about damn time I meet her."

"Absolutely not," Tim said. "That would be the most awkward."

"Because she's twice your age?" Claire said. "Either you come here or I'm showing up at your door."

Jen said she had errands to do and would meet him at Claire's, so Tim drank wine while his sister sat before the oven, squinting through the thick glass to make sure the beef tenderloin wasn't burning or drying out. "That'll give you brain tumors," he yelled into the kitchen.

"You're thinking of microwaves," Claire yelled back. "This'll just burn my face and maybe blind me."

He went and sat on the kitchen floor beside her. "Please don't make this weird with Jen, okay?"

"She must be something special," Claire said. "Is she your girlfriend? Your woman friend? Are you just one in a long line of young lovers?"

"I have no idea," Tim said. "Can this even work? She's probably got a secret husband somewhere."

"Look, most people suck," Claire said. "And you've found someone you like. Just

go with that for now." She stood up to stir something on the stove. "And I've got your back. I probably wouldn't *kill* this lady if she hurt you, but I'd egg the shit out of her house."

"We live in the same building," Tim said.

"So I'll egg her car instead."

Thirty minutes late, there came a knock on the door.

Claire clicked across the bamboo floor, opened it, and there stood Jen. Her hair was purple and there was a baguette sticking out the back of her tote bag.

"Sorry I'm late!" she said. "I hope I didn't keep you two waiting."

Tim gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. She had purple flyways. Jen and Claire shook hands like women: delicately, their hands moisturized but not sweaty.

"You must be Jen," Claire said. "I like your hair."

"Oh, thanks. Had a bit of a meltdown today."

"Well, you *look* fantastic," Claire said.

She did look fantastic. "A meltdown?" Tim said.

Jen pulled a bottle of wine out of her purse and handed it to Claire. "I hope you like red. I was going to make bruschetta, but I got distracted." She pointed to her hair. "I brought the stuff so we can make it fresh."

The women made their way to the kitchen and Tim followed. They talked about traffic and dog breeds while they assembled the bruschetta and shuttled food to the table. Tim and Jen sat opposite Claire. White candle wax pooled on the dark wood between them.

"So you said you had a meltdown," Claire said. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. I just started panicking about school and what the hell I'm doing with my life. So, I dyed my hair. I read online that it's what people do when they feel like they need control over their lives?"

"Yeah," Claire said. "When Tim got dumped, he burned his bed sheets."

Jen said, "Aw, poor Tim." She put her hand on his shoulder. "When was this?"

"Oh, two months ago," Claire said.

"Anyway," Tim said, "How's that hair dye working?"

"My scalp burns, but I think that's because I left the stuff in too long," Jen said. "I do feel stronger."

They ate Jen's bruschetta as a side dish. It was good, but not world-famous good. They drank two bottles of red wine and all had grey teeth. The wine made Tim anxious. Claire was chewing her beef in a bitchy, worrisome way. He rubbed Jen's knee to ground himself and her leg muscle flexed under his hand. He wondered if it was a signal and, if so, of what.

Claire said, "I'm glad to finally meet you, you know. Tim and I are very protective of each other."

"That's how it should be," Jen said. "He's a good kid."

"I wouldn't say I'm a kid," Tim said. "I'm twenty-one. They trust me with alcohol. I watch Mad Money."

Claire said, "Why did you leave Austin, anyway? I'm curious about the catalyst. I quit cigarettes after seeing a Theraflu commercial. There's always a catalyst. I mean, you left a job, presumably friends and family. And now you're dating my brother. Lots of moving parts here."

Tim said, “Jesus, Claire. Why don’t we get the espresso going? Who’s ready for tiramisu gelato?”

Jen said, “No, it’s fine. Just a long, sad story. But basically I ended a very unhealthy relationship and then dragged myself up here to heal. And Tim’s been so kind.” She said, “I guess it must be weird to hear that your little brother is hanging around with an old broad like me.”

“Forty isn’t old,” Tim said. “The way modern medicine is going, we’ll live until we’re a hundred and ten.” He tried to stare Claire down, but she wouldn’t look at him. No one would look at him.

“It’s doesn’t weird me out,” Claire said. “I’m just trying to figure out if I should jump on that train and date younger.”

“So far I’m a huge fan,” Jen said. “We built a bird sanctuary and we watch animals all day on the Internet.” She squeezed Tim’s shoulder. “It’s exactly what I’ve needed. I say go for it.”

Claire and Jen went on talking and Tim brought them gelato. While he waited to be invited into their women talk, he watched it melt.

When Jen said she should be going, she and Claire hugged like old friends. Tim followed her into the hall.

He said, “I could come home with you? Leave my car here? I feel like we hardly talked.” He said, “You could come over to my place maybe?”

“Claire is great. You should hang out for a while and give me a call later.” She kissed him. “This was really fun.”

With his previous girlfriends, Tim had been able to imagine a future. Sometimes he could see as far as marriage, dog and house; other times he could only envision dinners, sex and breaking up. But those were girls, not women. With Jen he had trouble imagining much at all. He could imagine sex quite vividly and maybe he had a vague notion that they'd see foreign films or start a workout routine. Maybe she didn't care to look forward.

When he got back from Claire's, Tim corralled the three koi, scooped them out of the pond with plastic grocery bags, and relocated them to his deep stainless steel kitchen sink. He rolled up his sleeves and lazily dragged his fingers through the water. The fish rolled over one another and their scales flashed against the shining sink bottom. Two orange and one milky white, all with black cow spots. None of them could swim straight, whether because of brain damage or physical injuries, but they were still powerful, and thick as fists. They gaped at his fingers, hoping for food. He no longer had it in him to let them get eaten on his account. They could stay in his sink for now.

He went down and knocked on Jen's door. He said he'd just checked the pond and it was empty. The heron must've come during dinner. He grabbed her hand. "I lured you a heron," he said. "We got a fucking heron."

She wore the combination of red wine teeth and purple hair with confidence. She fell across the threshold and into his arms. She took off running toward the pond to see for herself and Tim let himself get dragged along by the hand.

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Liars Like Him

Lionel Alarian was posted outside of a bar, trying to suck up secondhand smoke from strangers, when he met Tracy. She wore pearl earrings, but also said, "*Suck my dick*," when a passerby whistled at her. He was mesmerized, like a cat to a metronome.

She seemed well adjusted—probably from a pair of happily married Caucasian lawyers—and this was enticing. He was ready for a relationship with a genuine human being. Though he'd been spared the unibrow, Lionel was from Armenian stock, and his family was aggressively eccentric and manipulative. His mother, Catherine, would push money on him for Christmas and then hold that generosity over him when convenient. She'd taught him: when backed into a corner, deny, deny, deny. He was a raised liar. In addition, his father, Varter, had Asperger's and bipolar disorder with psychotic features and he'd been in a mental health clinic in Vermont since Lionel was fifteen.

He was thirty years old and he'd done his time with all this. Rather than tell Tracy the truth about his father's mental health problems on the night they met, he said that his father died when he was fifteen.

"He was an abusive, drunk asshole," Lionel said. "We were better off without him."

Tracy took a bite of fish taco, giving herself a long chew to think. She said, “My dad sells used cars.” She took another bite. “Sorry. I don’t have a filter,” she said through a full mouth. “Want to go on a walk with me?”

On their subsequent dates—museum of modern art, baseball game, Little Italy—they didn’t talk about Varter. Falling in love with Tracy was like moving to a foreign country. He remade himself into his best-case scenario.

For their one-year anniversary of dating, Lionel and Tracy planned a trip to Glacier National Park. The glaciers would be puddles by 2020 and they wanted to say their goodbyes.

Most of Lionel’s childhood memories involved mountains. His father had collaged and shellacked one entire wall in the living room with posters and postcards of mountains, and scrawled rock formation dates and glacial patterns onto post-its to fill in the gaps. But Lionel’s father had no purchase over his present. It would be he and Tracy’s first trip outside of Cleveland since they started dating and they saw it as a kind of test.

Unfortunately, two days before their plane took off, his mother called. She said that something had happened—Varter had committed suicide. Lionel’s first thought was: of course he would kill himself right before our trip. After the flash of resentment, he was just shocked.

Tracy was in the shower, but he stepped outside anyways. He laid down in his front yard. He said, “Jesus, mom. Are you okay?”

“He was never a happy man,” she said.

The Alarians, who Lionel hadn't seen in a decade, were having a memorial in Vermont a few days after he got back from the trip to Glacier. His mother had been proposing memorials for years—"Because he's dead to us," she'd say. She wanted him to go along with her.

"Bring Tracy along. She should be initiated into the family tragedies." She meant the general Armenian atrocities and the Alarian family tree of burnouts with the crowning star of his crazy father. She began huffing into the receiver. "There aren't many Armenians left and we have to show up when it counts. He was your *father*," she said. "Do you have something better to do?"

She was a master manipulator. She pulled the same shit to get him to come over and fix her printer.

"Tone it down," Lionel said. "If you're determined to go, then I'll go with you, but I can't do this right now."

"Maybe you shouldn't go to Montana, right?" she said. "Do you hate me for saying that?"

She was worried that seeing mountains would open the wounds inside him, or maybe he'd just lose his fucking mind altogether. He said he was going; he would be fine. He hung up and rolled over to lie facedown in the grass.

The father Tracy thought was dead all along was now truly dead and Lionel would be gone at least a few days for the memorial service. He never thought he'd see the Alarians again, and he certainly wasn't inviting Tracy. His realities, the actual and the ideal, were colliding and swallowing one another to create a supernova shitstorm.

When she got out of the shower, Tracy opened the front door and yelled, “How’s the yard smell today?”

He rolled over. “My mother wants us to cancel the trip because she’s worried we’re going to get eaten by grizzly bears.” True enough in the metaphorical sense.

Tracy lay next to him, still in her bathrobe. She said, “Your mother is a crazy person.”

He wouldn’t get a better segue than this, but he couldn’t bring himself to tell the truth yet. He hadn’t decided how to spin it. He felt lucky to have Tracy lying beside him in the yard. She called him on his manipulative bullshit and balanced him out with her overwhelming honesty. A reality in which he was lying there alone was just on the other side of his unsustainable lie. It scared the hell out of him.

Lionel took the first shift driving the tiny silver rental car through Glacier. They had a three-hour drive on Going-To-The-Sun road, straight through the park, to get to their campsite. All Tracy managed to find on the radio was static. The road emerged from a dense forest of one-hundred-foot pines and suddenly they saw the peaks, thousands of feet above the road, dwarfing them in their rental.

What Lionel could remember of his dad’s wall didn’t do the real thing justice. The improbable lushness at this altitude, the impossible sharpness of the ridges, mountain peaks like pencil points. Right before everything went all the way bad, when Lionel was thirteen, his dad stopped sleeping altogether. One night, Catherine got up for a glass of water and found that the patchwork mountain shrine crept onto the ceiling. Polyurethane

sealant dripped from above to form glossy puddles on the beige carpet. The yells woke Lionel.

Varter said that the drops were representative of stalagmites and in one million years they would form towers. They were essential to the project. Only he could see that far ahead and only he could see what their house truly was: the truest museum. He became convinced that his wife planned to tear it all down. He threw the heavy old TV onto the ruined carpet, grabbed her arm, and tried to drag her through the shattered glass.

Lionel was in the root of his father's hurt and felt open, almost thin.

The road was cut into the side of a mountain and barely wide enough for one lane of traffic in each direction. The far left was pressed against a sheer rock face and the right dropped off into a steep valley. Tracy rolled down her window and leaned out for a clearer view. She snapped pictures and yelled her praise into the canyon below. Lionel's eyes welled with tears and he felt something like the hollow tingling of new love spread from his stomach. It was for the place and Tracy and the blessed fact that he hadn't turned out crazy.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. He'd been dodging his mother's calls all day and had six voicemails. He glanced at the latest text message—"call me when you're safe. need name of hotel just in case! :("—and shut off his phone.

It started to rain and Tracy pulled her head back inside the car.

As the rain picked up, fragments of rock crumbled from the mountain and fell into the road. A worker in an orange rain suit and a hardhat used a snow shovel to clear the rocks and toss them over the barrier into the ravine. Lightning lit the canyon and it started to pour. Lionel could only see a few cars ahead and traffic came to a standstill. Rocks

clattered down onto the line of cars closest to the mountain. He was glad he'd gotten insurance on the rental.

He counted down from ten in his head three times before he was able to say, "This place reminds me of my dad."

"You've never told me much about him," Tracy said. She took his hand.

"He was obsessed with mountains. He was crazy," Lionel said. "Not zany, but literally, actually, clinically crazy." He held tight to her hand. "So when I say he was obsessed with mountains, I mean it's all he did, all he thought about, all he cared about."

"Wow. That's intense," she said. "This is serious, right?"

He outlined Varter's issues for her. He said, though he'd been afraid when he was a kid, his father's issues develop early on and you could see them coming. He had none of the warning signs; he was out of the woods.

"Shit," she said. "That's some serious shit." She looked pale. "Why did you wait to tell me?"

"I don't know," he said. "Who wants to date the son of a crazy person? I was afraid you'd leave me." Of course she leaned in to hug him, like he knew she would. He was unconsciously manipulative and good at it. It distressed him. He pushed Tracy back a bit. "No. That's not true," he said. "Mostly I just wanted to leave it behind."

She said she could understand wanting to leave a thing like that behind. "I'm glad you're not crazy," she said. "And I'm glad you told me the truth, even a year too late. But it worries me when you lie." Before Lionel could respond, she put the camera up between them. "Make your best crazy face for the photo album," she said. "We're making memories."

Lionel and Tracy woke at seven the next morning, sore from sleeping on the unforgiving earth, and began the five-mile hike to Iceberg Lake. The trail crept up a mile-wide valley and dead-ended into a colossal rock face topped by Iceberg Peak, thousands of feet above them. He almost understood why his father had focused his life's energies on mountains, of all things. He might've found a milder way to obsess, but that wouldn't have been his style; he'd been intense in every way. He impressed upon Lionel that all gods existed and aliens and utopia and he'd be a fucking moron to deny it. Varter had believed in everything and therefore nothing, a trait shared by his three older brothers, Lionel's uncles. Part of him was excited for the memorial—they were fun to be around.

Iceberg Lake was an opaque, milky blue. Huge masses of stark white ice floated lazily and a light rain pocked the reflective surface. Blackish blue clouds were coming fast from behind the peak. There was no way to see what was coming at them or how long it would last.

Tracy asked a fifty-something guy in a cutoff t-shirt if he would take a picture of them. He said, "Smile on three," and Lionel kissed Tracy on the cheek.

"Awe, that's a good one," the guy said. "You must be one tough cookie to make this hike. No way my lady would make it, though not all women are as delicate as mine." He winked at Tracy and held out a camera. "Mind taking a picture of me, sweetheart?"

Tracy took the camera by its wrist strap. She said, "Sure thing, honeydump," and Lionel lifted her off the ground in a hug.

The guy introduced himself as Mitch. They stood at the lake's edge watching the icebergs drift. In a matter of minutes, the drizzle picked up to a full rain. They didn't have

raincoats, so they threw on sweatshirts. Thunder boomed and bounced around the mountain range. The wind came rushing across the lake and down the valley like a wind tunnel. The ice floes coasted across the water and gathered at the shore in front of them, slamming together and echoing off the walls.

Mitch said, “I wouldn’t want to be them right now,” and pointed up the cliff to where a couple was free climbing. “They’ll wrap their hands in layers of tape and wedge them into cracks to hold them in place, but tape won’t do them much good if the rain gets worse,” he said. “It’d be like getting water boarded.”

Rain was pouring down the rock face and the climbers were the size of ants. Lionel yelled up, “Are you okay?” but the wind whipped his voice away. Probably they were fucked, but he hoped not.

Lightning flashed and Lionel counted to four before he heard thunder. It was pouring rain, beginning to hail, and it was too late to run down the trail toward more substantial tree cover. He found a clump of mangy pines, threw he and Tracy’s packs under, and scrambled beneath the branches. The temperature had dropped at least ten degrees. The trees didn’t do much to shelter them; the rain and hail seemed to be blowing up from underneath. He grabbed Tracy’s hands, breathed hot air over her fingers, and kept his lips pressed to her bright red knuckles. Mitch crawled up beside them and they squatted in a circle, their backs forming a weak barrier. The ice floes moved again with alarming speed and crashed into the far bank at the base of the rock wall.

They could see the climbers through the branches—just a pair of dark splotches behind the hazy sheets of rain. They didn’t seem to be moving. The next lightning strike shook the ground and rocks crashed into the lake from somewhere above. Tracy’s lips

were blue. Lionel kissed them and then continued heating her hands. Mitch had a pair of trekking poles—two aluminum lightning rods.

Lionel's ancestors had made it through the bottleneck of genocide, escaped their captors during a death march through the desserts of Syria, and it takes tough genes to do that. The Alarians called themselves cockroaches; they could survive nuclear fallout. If he were struck down by lightning, his crass, morbid, cockroach family would laugh about it at his funeral.

"How long is this going to last?" Tracy said. "I'm freezing."

"There's always body warmth," Mitch said. "Who wants to get naked? Ladies first."

Tracy leaned harder into Lionel's shoulder. She said, "No one is getting naked, dick."

"Just a little bit." Mitch pulled the collar of his sweater to show chest hair. "I'll show you mine."

The guy was reacting very inappropriately to his fear of dying under this tree. Harmless, but obnoxious. "That's enough," Lionel said. "Calm down."

"I'm just saying, if things get desperate, we may as well enjoy ourselves while we're stuck here," he said. "Don't you watch Discovery?"

Lionel thought he felt Tracy nudge him, so he rolled forward and shoved Mitch back into some branches. He said, "Shut the fuck up or get out of here."

Mitch rejoined the circle, a little farther away than before, and stayed quiet.

Tracy shook her head at Lionel. "Was that necessary?"

After thirty minutes, the storm began to break. The three of them did jumping jacks to warm their stiff muscles. Steam rose off their bodies and the lake's surface. They ran down the mountain before things had a chance to get bad again, Mitch first with Tracy tailgating him all the way. Each time Lionel's foot hit the rocky path, he felt his nerves shock all the way to his teeth. It wasn't until they were halfway down that he remembered the climbers—stuck, possibly injured, maybe worse. He didn't break stride. He probably couldn't make it back up the trail if he tried, and what could he have done for them anyway?

At the end of the hike, where the trail opened onto a parking lot, Lionel found a park ranger in a poncho and told him about the climbers.

"Are they okay?" the ranger said. "Did you talk to them?" He spoke into his radio and pulled out pen and paper.

"We were in a rush to get down," Lionel said. "They must be fine, right?"

The ranger held him for questioning—exact time, location, appearance and clothing of the climbers—while Tracy stood shivering and impatient by the car.

They went back to camp and put dry clothes on, then drove a few miles to the Many Glacier Hotel for heat and food. The hotel was on the shore of a still lake, across from a magnificent mountain shaped like a pilgrim's hat. The dining room was full of damp, defeated hikers who'd been caught in the same storm. Mitch, thank christ, was nowhere to be seen. Lionel didn't know what those climbers looked like—and maybe they were dead, not looking like anything—but he decided they were at a table eating soup and

recounting the incredible shit they'd just lived through together. Maybe it even brought them closer. He told Tracy he was wondering about them.

"Oh god," she said. "I totally forgot about them." She put a hand over her mouth and looked around the room.

"We had our hands full," Lionel said. "I remembered halfway down the mountain, but didn't have the energy to run back. I told a ranger after the hike," he said. "What could we have done?"

"I can't believe I forgot something like *that*," she said. "What is wrong with me?"

It was nice, for once, to feel that he had the more acute sense of compassion and morality. He rubbed her shoulders and said he was sure the climbers were fine, though he wasn't.

The dining room was musty, yet beautiful—vaulted ceilings and windows tall enough to frame the enormous mountains. The scarlet walls were crowded with mounted animal heads and wide-mouthed fish on oak boards. They got a table with a view. They ate bison steaks and drank huckleberry beer.

"You got a little worked up today with that prick under the tree," Tracy said. "It was a little over the top. Even for you."

"Yeah, well, he was a prick," he said. "What do you mean *even for me*?"

"It's how you are. You say things to things to get under people's skin and get what you want," she said. "It's just a different form of aggression." The speech was rehearsed, like she'd been practicing all day.

"I don't *try* to be that way. I just *am*," he said. "I try *not* to be that way."

"Raised by wolves," Tracy said.

"Exactly."

"So you can't help lying," she said. "You just do it all the time."

He put an open hand on the table and she took it. She looked like she was getting ready to cry. "I'm sorry I lied about my dad," he said.

Tracy said he scared the shit out of her sometimes. He left her feeling like she was floating in space.

"I'll do my best to be better," he said. "That's why I need you. To keep me in line."

It takes a screwed up mess to continue lying to a person you love while they cry and beg for honesty.

They paid the bill and perused the hotel's combination outfitter. They didn't want to be caught unprepared again. Lionel got three canisters of bear spray because he figured they were like handguns in action movies in that a certain percentage of them would jam up and refuse to work when you needed them. Tracy got a bundle of firewood for the campsite, a flashlight, some granola bars, and a pair of dry socks. She took care of him.

Later, when Tracy was asleep in their zipped-together sleeping bags, Lionel snuck away to call his mother. He took two bear sprays, just in case. He asked why she'd married Varter—she was decently sane; how could she, or anyone, love someone like him?

"Your father was a handsome Armenian man, for God's sake," she said. "You're lucky you got his genes in the looks department."

"I feel very thankful," Lionel said.

"You didn't know him when he was younger. He was like you, but much more charming," she said. "And before your father had mountains, he had me. It's not his fault he was born with a broken head."

"You stopped loving him when he went nuts?"

"No, he just stopped being the man I loved," she said. "Listen to me. Talking poetry."

Lionel told his mother how he'd lied to Tracy from day one—she didn't know about the mental hospital, the memorial, or that Varter had just died.

"Quite the pit of lies," she said. "When things get bad, just remember that it could always be worse. Look at *my* life. My husband is dead and my son is two-thousand miles away on vacation in his father's nightmare delusion."

Lionel built a fire. He spent hours sitting on a stump, waiting for the sun to rise, and imagining worst-case scenarios. Tracy could leave him. He could continue lying and get left later. They could get eaten by bears while they slept, all of the pepper spray canisters having malfunctioned.

When he got tired, he laid all three bear sprays by Tracy's side in the tent and then climbed into the backseat of the rental. He snacked on a couple of granola bars, but then couldn't sleep because the granola crumbs he'd let fall onto the plush seat were digging into his skin like bits of gravel. He wiped the seat repeatedly until his hand left paths like a vacuum on carpet. He still felt crumbs. He rolled around and around and finally fell asleep just as the sky was turning a bluish gray between the treetops.

“It smells terrible in here. Did you spend all night in here making it smell as terrible as possible?”

He was in a moving car, the sun bright in his eyes. He sat up. “What’s going on?”

“A ranger came by camp,” Tracy said. “There’s bears on a hillside a few miles down the road, so we’re going to see that. I didn’t want to wake you.” She looked at him in the rearview. “Were you in here all night?”

“Couldn’t sleep,” he said. “Though curling up in this fucking car didn’t help anything.”

“I woke up alone,” she said. “You could’ve told me. I could’ve stayed up with you.”

The lies ballooning between them were reaching critical mass. He was sure she felt it, too.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “That was wrong.” He wrapped around the headrest and kissed her. “Let’s see some bears together, okay?”

A handful of cars were pulled off the road and onto the shoulder. Tracy parked and hopped out of the car. A park ranger was letting visitors take turns with a scope he had on a tripod pointed uphill. Lionel’s shoes were back at camp and the rocks on the side of the road sunk into his soft soles, like an interminable walkway of granola crumbs.

Tracy already had her eye pressed to the scope.

“Good morning, sir,” the ranger said. “Good morning to see a bear.”

He straightened his ridiculous aviators and Lionel brushed rocks off his feet.

Tracy stepped back to give him a turn. The momma griz was grazing and her two little cubs were wrestling, one sitting on the other's head. They were cute. He was glad to see them from a distance; the bear spray was back at camp.

He said he needed to talk to Tracy, so they walked to the car and both climbed into the backseat. She asked what was going on. "Just say it."

"Remember how I said my dad died when I was fifteen?"

"Yeah," she said. "Of course."

"Well, he didn't."

The shock of this lie flipped some switch in her brain so that, apparently, anything seemed possible. She whipped around to look out the back window like Varter would be standing there with a chainsaw.

"*Now* he's dead. He's been in a mental health clinic since I was fifteen and he killed himself a few days ago," Lionel said. "My mom told me right before the trip."

"Holy shit, Lionel." He watched dozens of emotions flash across her face. She settled on confused rage. "Why the fuck would you lie about that?"

She scooted to the opposite side of the car and put her feet up on his thigh, pushing him away and herself into the door.

"I thought it would make everything easier, and then he died," Lionel said. "How do you go back on a lie like that?"

"Do you just lie all the time about everything?" Tracy said. "What else do you lie about?" She started crying. This was what floating in space looked like.

"No. I made a few mistakes and I'm sorry. That's it," he said. "No secret identities. I'm not a spy or anything."

"You're making jokes?" she said. She thrust her legs into him. "Lionel, you fucked up. Do you realize that? Are you even capable of realizing?"

He understood that she was done with him, but he wasn't ready to let go. Or maybe it was the faint challenge of a person defying him, closing a door on him, that made him need to push it open.

He told her about the memorial. He said his whole Armenian family would be there, all the dirty laundry in one heap. He said he wanted her to come. She could meet the family. "I need you there," he said. He begged her.

She looked out the window for a long time, huffing like bears did when they were getting ready to charge (according to all the pamphlets). The exhales from her nose fogged two cones onto the glass. He tried to imagine Tracy at the memorial, surrounded by Alarians, liars like him. There was no higher honesty. She'd be horrified.

"Your father just killed himself," she said.

When she looked at him, he realized how long it'd been since they looked one another in the eye in this searching way, like a spotlight in an interrogation room.

They spent the final day and a half of their trip talking and going on walks around the campground. Tracy cried quite a bit and Lionel buried his face in her shoulder or his palm to hide his dry eyes—he hadn't cried since he was a kid. It wasn't that he didn't care—he did—he was just incapable.

They talked it over again and again. Lionel thought if they got through the memorial then everything would be fine. He made her a lot of promises. She said she'd

come to the memorial, but didn't know what that meant for them. It was a miracle she was coming at all.

On the way out of the park, they stopped at a gift shop. Lionel's mother perceived a direct correlation between souvenirs and love, so he had to get her something. It would be cruel (though funny) to give her mountain paraphernalia on the occasion of her ex-husband's death. He chose a framed print of *Advice from a Wolf*. It said things like "Trust your instincts" and "Keep your den clean" and "Pack life with good memories."

"From a wolf, for a wolf," Tracy said.

He would have to get used to comments like that.

Varter had been the youngest of four Alarian brothers and Davit, the oldest brother, was hosting the memorial at his house in Vermont. Lionel drove Tracy and Catherine the eight hours from Cleveland in one shot, not wanting to subject anyone to his mother's road trip anxieties for longer than was necessary. They arrived right on time.

Before they went inside, Lionel squeezed Tracy's hand. "Steel yourself." He pointed to his mother, who was ceaselessly knocking on the storm door, and said, "But worse and crazier."

Tracy didn't look happy; she looked willing.

A woman Lionel didn't know opened the door and ushered them inside. "Welcome. A very sad day," she said. "Lahmajun and choereg in the kitchen."

Lionel had been to Davit's house a few times when he was a kid and the floorboards were still inexplicably painted the sickly pale blue of doctors' scrubs. The house was full of Armenians, most of whom weren't related to the family. They drank

wine from bags and ate lamb kebabs and spoke much louder than was necessary. Catherine wore a sheer black scarf wrapped over her hair and drifted from room to room with her head bowed. She murmured "thank you" over and over, even when no one was offering condolences. She'd wanted to have this memorial for years and all of the preparatory visualizations were paying off—she was on autopilot, looking genuinely sad.

The dark skinned, dark haired, hairy masses made Tracy look whiter than usual. The noise and insanity forced her closer to Lionel and she held his arm tight. He saw the three Alarian brothers holding court on the living room couch and he guided her in their direction. His uncles—Davit, Grigor and Voskan—stood and hugged him, slapping his back so hard it hurt, a challenge like everything else. He pounded their backs in response.

Davit had on a vintage Miami Dolphins Starter jacket, the same one he'd worn when Lionel was a kid. It was for Garo Yepremian, who was the Dolphins' kicker during the 1972 perfect season. There weren't many famous Armenians—Kavorkian, Kardashian, Cher—so people tended to fixate.

Lionel pointed to Davit's jacket. "*I keek a touchdown!*" he said. "Glad to see you haven't changed clothes in a decade."

Davit turned to Tracy, took her hand, kissed it. "I'm sorry my nephew doesn't have any fucking manners," he said. "But I'm his uncle Hobart and it's a pleasure to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, Hobart," Tracy said.

Lionel and the other two uncles laughed. Tracy looked to Lionel.

"They've always made fun of my name," Davit said. "And the insults still hurt, you know? I'm sensitive." He quivered his lower lip and collapsed onto the couch with his head in his arms.

Tracy looked startled by Hobart's fake sobbing. She looked at Lionel and mouthed "*what the fuck.*"

Alarian gatherings were like large-scale, nonstop improvisation sketches. Everyone stepped into their lies and, in this way, they stepped into themselves.

Tracy whispered, "I love you, but your family is freaking me out." She wanted to get some air.

Lionel kissed the top of Davit's shaking head—no doubt shaking with laughter. "You have a beautiful name," he told his uncle.

Tracy walked away, but Davit grabbed Lionel's hand and held him back.

"Your mother told me about the big pit of lies you told your girlfriend," Davit said. "An Alarian through and through." He gave Lionel a firm handshake with a wanton laugh, like they were bonding over a tasteless joke, which they kind of were.

Lionel and Tracy stood on the front porch. "How do you deal with these people?" she said.

"It's my family," he said. "I love them."

She grabbed his blazer and pulled him into a kiss. "You love *me*," she said, and looked in his eyes like that, pleading for honesty.

He felt bad for her. In a room full of compulsive liars, it must tough to know who to look to for the truth. You ultimately don't even know who it is you're looking at.

"I *do* love you," he said, though she didn't look convinced.

The Sinking Problem

A thunderstorm had been lingering over Northwest Ohio for days, flooding the cornfields and forest that surrounded the Hacketts' house. The nearby creek swelled beyond its banks and poured over the bridge that connected their country road to the rest of humanity. The Hacketts and their two neighbors were on their own until the water receded. The island was newly without electricity. At breakfast they were forced to eat cereal and granola bars. At night the Hacketts fought over the single working flashlight.

Eleven-year-old Mason Hackett was standing atop the fireplace mantle in the pitch-black living room when the yelling started. He was baring his teeth, pretending to be a vampire, waiting for an unsuspecting victim. He listened from his perch as his parents argued about contingency plans.

"Have you called anyone yet?" his mother asked.

"I called my parents today and told them what's going on," his father said. "They wished us good luck. Told us to call if we need anything."

"What could they do?" she said. "Airdrop crates of supplies? Blow us kisses?"

"We've done this before. This isn't fucking Katrina," he said. "We don't need to call the fucking National Guard. We'll eat Chef Boyardee for two days. Calm down."

"Don't tell me to *calm down*." Here, she used the sloppy voice she reserved for mocking people she considered stupid—politicians, Mason's soccer coach, her husband.

She'd droop her mouth like she was having a stroke. "What if Mason broke his leg?" she said. "Or Margot got sick? How would we get to the hospital?"

"I have an idea," Mr. Hackett said. "Why don't we just continue doing our best to avoid fatal injuries? As per usual."

It ended with name-calling and a slammed door, though they couldn't storm away from each other because they were sharing the only flashlight in the house. Mason climbed down from the mantle as carefully as was possible in complete darkness.

The next morning, the Hacketts slumped around the kitchen table, lifeless and unresponsive, like someone had poisoned the orange juice and they'd perished quietly over their Cornflakes. They were slouchy and unshowered and itchy.

Mason suggested a game of Millennium Edition Monopoly; they had nothing better to do. His father said he'd be the banker. Mason took the Porsche marker for himself, then gave the computer to his father and the globe to his mother. He told his little sister, Margot, that there were only three pieces in the box, sorry about her luck.

She lifted her head from the table. The texture of the woven placemat had left an imprint of a furrowed brow atop her actually-furrowed brow. She disappeared and returned with a square "M" tile from Scrabble. She set it in the center of the Monopoly board with a click.

"M is for Margot," she said.

"You know who else is named Margot?" Mason said. "Anne Frank's sister." Margot showed no signs of understanding. "She's super dead."

"You calling me a *dead* person?" Margot said.

"So we each start out with fifteen-hundred dollars," their dad said. "But I'm giving each of you a few extra blue bills to mellow your moods. To soothe the nerves. It's everyone's lucky day." He doled out the sherbet-colored money.

"Wouldn't yellow make more sense?" Mason said. "Mellow yellow."

"Lucky ducky," Margot said.

"Lucky?" their mother said. "Ha! Ha-ha!"

Mr. Hackett started to hum, something he did when he wanted a conversation to end. He hummed often. Smooth transitions between unresolved conflicts and unaddressed issues. The Hacketts' marriage buzzed right along.

When someone passed *Go!*, Mr. Hackett would say, "No such thing as a free lunch in the real world, bucko." His cards and money were in a disorganized pile before him as if he didn't care at all. He owned Boardwalk and Park Place and was quietly negotiating a deal to take control of all four railroads.

Margot adopted her father's cutthroat tactics. She endeavored to bankrupt her brother. She built hotels on the yellows and bit her nails while she waited for his token to come around. When Mason finally landed on her property, she extended a fray-nailed hand and said, "Show me the *mon-ay*."

Mrs. Hackett kept landing on hotels and housing developments. She called her husband a slumlord: "If this were real life I'd organize an uprising and burn you to the ground." She was down to her last hundred and a ways away from the free lunch when she drew a card from Community Chest.

She tilted the card to catch some light from the window, their only source of light: *Advance to the Electric Company.* If no one owned it (they didn't), she could buy it. The

top-hatted Monopoly man shrugged at her from the center of the board as if to say, “Such is life!” She split her assets between her children and went to have a cigarette on the front step.

“Oh come on, honey,” her husband hooted.

“You deserve this,” she said. “Kids—your father’s been stealing from the bank.”

Margot threw her money in the air and pocketed the Scrabble tile.

“You’re a lawyer, dad,” Mason said. “And a liar. You’re setting a terrible example for the kids.”

Mason sat quietly while his mother smoked. Rain speckled their feet and the landscape was unrecognizable. The far edge of the front yard typically dropped off into the woods below, where a tiny creek snaked past, but the nonstop rain and runoff had flooded the entire forest. The brown water now stretched out as an extension of their yard and cut through the trees to form a single impassable plane. Soccer balls and Styrofoam coolers rushed by in the current.

A few ducks rode the rapids for sport. Mason recognized them as wood ducks. When his grandfather died a few years back, the dozens of duck decoys that he’d spent his life carving and painting got passed down and ended up perched around the house as decoration. Mallards sat on dressers and atop toilet tanks. They made for creepy bookends. The wood duck decoy sat on the coffee table in the living room, watching you watch TV. The real wood ducks’ heads bobbed back and forth as they charged the whitewater, red eyes focused, white flairs running down their necks. They floated right around the submerged bridge that held the Hacketts’ lives in pause.

Mason's mother walked to where the yard met the water and squared up to toss her cigarette at a spare tire that was floating by. She raised her arm in front of her, closed one eye, and aimed straight down the barrel. She exhaled slowly then flicked with force, sending the filter straight through the empty center of the moving target. Mason whooped from the step as his mother held her hand up like a gun and blew imaginary smoke from her index finger.

Mason asked if he could play outside now that the storm was over. He held his hands out for rain. "I need to get away from the house for a while."

She said yes, as long as he stayed near the house—the water was dangerous when it was moving this fast. "And who knows what's in there," she said. "Pesticides and other junk from the cornfields."

When they had electricity, Mason and his mom watched Law & Order together. He said he agreed to the aforementioned terms.

"I have to go deal with your dirty, rotten father," she said. "Who cheats at Monopoly anyways?"

His parents always leaned toward him when they complained about each other. They nodded and smiled encouragingly like he was midway through a tough word at a spelling bee. She opened the door to go inside and they heard a hummed rendition of "Good King Wenceslaus" echoing around the foyer.

She sat to have another cigarette before going inside.

The backyard was a mess of lakes. Two mallard ducks were drifting around the swing set and Mason watched them play and dive until his neighbor Bethany rode out of the fog

from two houses down. The mallards took off, revealing the matching purple feathers on their extended wings. Bethany circled Mason on her shining silver bike. He watched the purple beads on the spokes of her front wheel blur into a ring.

Bethany was two years older and a foot and a half taller than him. She was a widely feared giantess—the tallest girl in middle school by far, always towering down the hall above the boys, making them self-conscious and hateful. But she was determined to make the most of her affliction vis-à-vis Olympic volleyball. She'd travel the world with other Olympic-sized women, learn six different languages, marry a prince in France. She would flee Ohio for greener, more European pastures—it was all she talked about.

"I'm going to live right on the waterfront," she said.

Mason pointed out that they were already living on the waterfront and Bethany shoved his shoulder as she rode past.

"The *French* waterfront," she said.

He yelled toward the house for help. Last summer, Mason had had to get stitches when Bethany pushed him out of the tree house with the bristly end of a broom. She shoved him again and sent him down to sit beside the earthworms in a puddle. From the side of the house came a Tarzan battle cry—that cracked, warbling sound he made as he swung through the jungle on a creaking vine. Bethany squinted into the misty backyard, the vertical stripes of silhouetted trees.

The call sounded again and Margot came sprinting out from behind the garage, mud smeared on her face like war paint. She held a big stick above her shoulder like a spear and javelined it through the spokes of Bethany's front wheel. Bethany tried to ride

away with the stick lodged in place and a series of metallic pops sounded as the spokes snapped one by one. Purple beads scattered across the driveway.

Margot stepped in front of Mason to shield him. She pulled an orange rubber boomerang from the back of her shorts and waved it like they'd seen Indiana Jones do with his torch in the catacombs.

Bethany looked at her broken spokes. She said, "I'm going to tell my dad, you *bitch*."

Margot and Mason weren't allowed to say *bitch* because only adults understood its powers and connotations. Their parents used it quite often. Their mom might say, "Go ahead, call me a bitch *one* more time." And their father, a man of few words, might let a lone "bitch" fly in response. Until the kids proved themselves to be responsible adults, they had to make due with *frick* and *eff* and *shiz*.

"*Bitch*," Bethany said again.

Margot made like she was going to wing the boomerang at Bethany's face. "Get off our effing property before I call the police," she said. "Go tell your daddy."

Bethany spat at their feet and said that this wasn't the end of it. She walked her bike toward home, the broken spokes picking brightly as they hit metal with each turn.

Mason's ears buzzed with adrenaline, but their victory was tinged with looming punishments and counter offensives. It reeked of "*Bikes don't grow on trees*" and "*I'm disappointed in you two*." Mason hoped that Bethany would be a merciful loser just this once and let it go, but he suspected that they had it coming.

She'd either get back at them herself, or—worse—she'd tell her father, who was a psychopath. The last time Mason and Margot had toilet-papered Bethany's house at

night, her dad came charging out of the dark and yelled, “I’m gonna blow your fucking heads off.” They hid in a bush for two hours getting eaten alive by mosquitoes until he finally stopped searching. He showed up at their door the next morning and made them use golf clubs to fish the paper out of his pine trees. After hours of cleaning and apologizing, their father had spanked them anyways, something he never did. Margot felt so betrayed that she loped around the house like a wounded animal and refused to speak to him for days afterward.

They put their probable punishment out of their minds and added one to their win column. They sat against the garage door, a pair of real winners.

The world would only be flooded for another day or two and they still hadn’t gotten a look at it—the trees enclosing their yard blocked the landscape from view. Houses could’ve been floating away and they would’ve had no idea. Cats swimming out of trees, firemen be damned. Boats motoring through ditches—Ohio a new, fleeting Venice. The submerged bridge was the only break in their border and Margot wanted to go for a look.

The question on Mason’s mind: *to what degree will we regret this*? Very much, he thought, but Margot interrupted his deliberation with, “Don’t be such a wuss.” She could be a real witch like that. She stuffed a bag with shovels and pails meant for sandcastles, a hammer, and a couple of warm sodas. Mason grabbed his binoculars and slung a coil of rope across his chest. They flipped up the hoods on their matching hunter green rain jackets and set out on the half-mile expedition to the bridge.

Their house was at the dead end of their three-house road, furthest from the bridge, and they had to walk along the Marbles’ and Buttany’s front yards. They kept

their eyes peeled for signs of movement and stayed on the border of grass and creek, under a dripping canopy of leaves.

Hal and Becky Marble's property was the DMZ between their house and Bethany's. The Marbles were an older couple. They were very tolerant. They didn't take issue with the spying or the wagon convoys crossing their perfectly mowed grass. But thus far they'd denied Margot's invitations to be undercover agents on her and Mason's team. Margot said, "If they're not with us, they're against us," and walked through Mrs. Marble's longest, most colorful flowerbed. She tramped on daffodils and kicked the heads off the orange and red tulips.

Although Mason was a year older, his sister led most of their missions: monitoring Bethany's dad's behavior to confirm that he worked for the FBI, monitoring Bethany's behavior on suspicion that she was undercover for France's version of the FBI, monitoring everyone in general for suspicious behavior in general. Margot never ran away when an adult spotted them digging trenches or cutting down saplings. She had unwavering faith in the righteousness of their cause. Mason, on the other hand, knew that there was no cause. The Marbles were dissenters to be treated as hostile because the truth—they were Plain Jane retired school administrators—was devastatingly unexciting.

Margot flashed some hand signals at him. Mr. Marble was grilling by his garage, wearing his big yellow lawn-mowing headphones. The kids crouched in the mud beside the destroyed flowerbed in the center of his yard.

"You kids hungry?" He flipped his steaks. "Got plenty of food here. Medium rare."

They remained silent and still. After a while, the grill hood slammed and Mr. Marble stepped inside.

They dodged from tree to tree in crouched sprints until they reached the place where their street forked: right into Bethany's driveway and straight ahead through the woods to the bridge. Bethany's bike was lying on her front walk, spokes pointed at the sky. Without warning, Margot bolted from behind the tree and took off towards the bridge.

Mason jumped after her and called for her to wait up.

He watched the bag hit his sister's back with each stride, heard the hammer rattling plastic pails and pop cans. She never looked back to see if he was following and her hood flew back as she rounded a bend out of sight.

When he caught her, Margot was on one of the bridge's buttress walls, which kept the creek from washing out the bank. She was posed atop the shoulder-height cement wall, fists on hips, surveying the kingdom.

"There you are," she said. "Told ya we'd make it."

He went to where she was standing and grabbed her ankles. He gripped them as tight as he could and shook. "Don't fall in," he said through clenched teeth.

Margot dropped to her knees and grabbed the wall. He pulled himself up beside her and stood over her. "You don't have to be such a bitch all the time," he said.

They were only a couple feet above the creek. In front of them, the current rushed over the submerged bridge. The steel guardrails stuck out of the brown water and caught debris. Branches, cups, a football, and the tire their mother tossed her cigarette through were all held there by the water pressure, vibrating with energy.

Mason and Margot had crossed the creek before. They'd built rafts from dead trees, lashed them together with rope and tied empty milk jugs around the perimeter for help with the sinking problem. As their father had said: "Some real MacGyver shit." They'd pushed themselves across, digging long poles into the muddy creek bed for guidance, up to their ankles on a sinking boat, Margot even getting a leech once.

But it was usually only twenty feet across at its widest point and a few feet deep at most. Now the high-volume current bottlenecked beneath the bridge and surged out the other side, roiling with energy. The exposed guardrails acted as a giant strainer in the creek, breaking thick logs and sending the splintered fragments spinning downstream. After the bridge, the water spread and slowed into a shallow foggy lake at least a quarter-mile across. The flood plane they called home had filled up. The cornfields, forest floor, grass, and their street were all beneath the surface.

Mason pointed through the fog. There was splashing where the new lake came to an end against a hillside. Mason lifted the bird-watching binoculars out of his jacket and looked back.

Their closest neighbors off the island were swimming in the calm reaches of the lake, their beach towels laid out on the grassy shore. Three sisters with yellowish streaks dyed into their brown hair stood in a line, decreasing in height and breadth from one to the next like the three bears or Russian stacking dolls. The girls did dolphin dives and skipped a tennis ball to each other across the surface, while their mother threw a thick stick into the water and a big white dog leapt in after it.

The family's blue minivan was parked on the far end of the hill. Its roof was stacked with plastic storage bins, and piles of folded clothes sat on a tarp under the

chassis, sheltered from the rain. They'd been flooded out of their house and come to the beach on vacation. All they could do was distract themselves.

Mason waved an arm and yelled out across the lake, but the roar of the dammed bridge drowned out his voice. In the binoculars, the girls were curtseying to one another in a circle, one after the next, as if unable to decide which of them was the most royal. Their dog came out of the water with the stick in its mouth, its white fur tinged mossy green and brown from the grass-bottomed lake.

There was whistling somewhere nearby, high and lucid like a songbird. Bethany was walking toward them out of the forest, using fallen floating trees as a walkway. Her eyes were on the precarious pathway, her lips puckered into a flute.

Mason expected her to whip out her Nerf cannon or push them into the creek, but she didn't. Apparently she'd decided to postpone the game on account of rain. She hopped up to join them on the wall.

They watched the family splashing around where the road usually wound past the hill. The sisters dunked under to do handstands.

"My mom said there could be fertilizer in the water," Mason said.

"You know, I've always wanted a pool," Bethany said. "And then we wake up two days ago and—*boom*—a giant muddy pool is surrounding our houses. Pretty cool."

"They got flooded out of their house," Mason said.

"Giant poisonous pool," Margot said.

"I wonder if the water's still rising or going down already or right in the middle," Mason said. "Where's it all gonna go?"

"Into the ground and into the sky," Bethany said. "Not sure how much goes where. Maybe half and half."

The swimmers' mother took the stick from the big dog's mouth and wound up to toss it into the water. She stopped mid-throw and the dog leapt in after nothing. She'd spotted them—she waved. She said something to her three girls and then the whole family waved while the dog paddled in circles looking for the stick that never got thrown.

Mason waved both arms over his head and the girls joined in. Bethany's arms stretched far above their heads. They were kindred survivors of the squall. Mason saluted them.

Margot hopped off the wall, picked up a dead tree limb, and threw it as far as she could, yelling "*fetch!"* just as it left her hand. The stick—more of a log—didn't go far, but the yell and booming splash caught the idling dog's attention. "*Fetch,*" she yelled again.

The white dog found Margot's voice and paddled toward them, its nose bobbing above the water. The stick was on the edge of the quick current, cruising downstream to where the creek blended back into the forest and disappeared; it was already fading from sight.

Each time she yelled, "*Fetch*," the dog corrected its path toward her.

The stick was gone. The dog was swimming all that way for nothing, straight toward them—toward the rushing current. "Margot what the hell are you doing?" Mason said.

"*Hey, go back*," Bethany yelled over the water. "*No. Bad dog*."

Mason yelled, "*Turn back*. *No,"* and, "*Help*," because it was all he could think of.

The dog altered its bearing with each yell, directing itself toward their voices and the current rushing out from the bridge. They waved their hands and yelled to the family—"*call your dog.*" The sisters looked confused and the mother, her face blurry at a distance, seemed to be smiling.

The dog crossed into the fast downstream current. It drifted under the added pressure and angled itself upstream, struggling to keep from being washed away. Its eyes were wide and white. It reminded Mason of a TV show he'd seen about polar bears swimming for hours between ice floes, hunting tirelessly for land and food, sometimes dying of exhaustion or dehydration in the process. They showed a clip of a bear being picked over by birds, red on white. The camera was in a helicopter overhead and the birds' movements were muted by distance. Their meal was never-ending.

Margot said Mason's name over and over. She did what they taught her to do in case a bomb got dropped on her elementary: duck down, crouch into a ball, arms over your head.

Mason pulled the bag off her back, dug around and found a can of pop. He threw it as hard as he could. It went over the dog's head. The dog turned at the sound of the splash and made like it was going to chase it downstream—to where the current was easier—but then it turned back toward them. It was tired and wanted to come to shore.

The dog was going to die. Mason waited for himself to act again.

He wondered why the pilots of the helicopter hadn't shot the floundering polar bear, how they could do nothing. He wanted to shoot the dog before it drowned in front of him. He wanted anything else. A shark to break the surface and swallow it whole—the

bear and the dog—then swim off with the blame in its jaws. Mason would think twice when he saw murky water. A small, impersonal tragedy.

Bethany pulled another can out of the bag. Without hesitation, she pitched the can at the dog. It yelped and wavered, hunkered lower as if to dodge more incoming projectiles. It might fight through the abuse of these strangers just to die in the creek. Did they throw the hammer next? The shovels and pails and raincoats? But the dog looked over at them and finally turned and paddled away. It coasted out of the current and toward the family, which was now screaming and jumping. Even from a quarter mile, Mason could see their outrage. The sisters were pounding their fists into the water. They made hollow splashes loud like cannon blasts to hold their dog's attention and guide him back to safety.

It'd been hours since they left home. They hopped off the wall and stood in a puddle. All Mason could think to say was, "That was so fucked up." Margot looked terrified and lost in her big green raincoat. She told Bethany they'd buy her a new bike.

"It's just a bike," Bethany said. She grabbed the hem of her white volleyball sweatshirt and drew it out like a skirt, then wandered back into the woods toward home.

Mason didn't say a word to his sister on the way home; he could tell by looking at her that she didn't need to hear it. On his mind all at once: the dog almost going down, the merciful breadth of water separating them from the family, the wish to kill something before it had the chance to die, or the wish that it would die out of sight. He wanted to go home and curl up at his parents' feet, where all there was was the familiar beat of their bouncing knees and tapping toes.

When they got home, the wood floor in the foyer was covered with open books and damp cardboard boxes falling apart with moisture. It smelled like wet dust. Their mother came out of the kitchen with trash bags and paper towel rolls.

"Where the hell have you two been?" she said. "You could've died."

"*Eff*," Margot whispered.

They toed along the clear spaces between drying paperback mysteries, photo albums, elementary school projects blurring into nothing. They took towel rolls out of their mother's arms and she hugged them. She said they'd been worried, but too busy to panic—the generator running their sump pump had stopped working and groundwater had seeped up from beneath the foundation. This was the third or fourth time their basement had flooded. The curse of the flood plane, their sinking house. Mason could almost see the words forming on her lips: *I need a fucking cigarette.*

Mason heard the tiny waves before he saw them. He imagined he was holding a spiraled shell to his ear. Margot sniffled in the dark behind him and he flicked on the flashlight. DVDs were floating against the basement steps like boats docked to shore.

He stepped into the freezing cold water, which filled his rain boots and hit just below his knees. He went straight to the breaker box and flipped all the basement switches off, just in case the power came back on. They only had the one flashlight and Margot had to stay close by his side as they walked. He gripped the flashlight in his teeth and bagged stuff that looked salvageable: VHS Disney movies, shoeboxes of photos, old stuffed animals their mother saved for grandkids, tax records, soccer equipment. He'd

never thought to categorize the objects in his life as ones that would sink versus ones that would float.

The flashlight beam hit Margot's face. She dragging an empty white trash bag across the water behind her and crying, her face slack with exhaustion. Tears glided down and dropped into the flood. He told her to leave if she wasn't going to help. She turned and sloshed toward the stairs.

He went to the back storage room and turned his head to shine the light around. Beady eyes shone back at him: decoys lifted from their boxes and perches by the rising water. He might set ten or twenty loose in the yard and attract a flock of real birds. And when the water went down, the decoys would come to rest gently in the grass.

"How's it going down here?"

His father had waded up in the dark. His face was blotchy and his hair matted with sweat. "I've been trying to get the generator to work," he said. "But clearly the damage has been done."

Maybe Noah had it right as far as disaster avoidance went. If everything was made of wood, then it would float. If it floated, it wouldn't sink. Simple.

"But what about tornadoes? Lightning. Hurricanes. Monsters. Missiles. Icebergs," his father said. "These things just happen sometimes."

The Hacketts crawled around the foyer airing out books and peeling apart wet pieces of paper. They looked through stacks of old family photos the water had fused into bricks. There were photos of vacations that the kids had been too young to remember going on, though they recognized their own soft faces. Their parents tried to help them remember.

Two photos blurred into one another, transferring settings and memories into a single exposure. A picture of an unfamiliar mountain range bled into a recent photo of Mason at a track meet. Maybe his father had pulled the car over during a road trip so that Mason could run off the shoulder of the highway toward the mountains, his mother taking the picture from the passenger seat.

The lights in the house flickered on, the digital clocks all beeped at once, and the generator roared to life outside. The keepsakes spread across the floor were lit like articles on display in a museum. Margot tucked herself under her father's arm. Her face was still withdrawn into the cave of her rain jacket's hood.

Much of the stuff had been through multiple floods, ruined several times, dried and stored again. Some things, after years of slow erosion, were just piles of pulp. Mrs. Hackett eased into her husband's shoulder with a sigh and Mr. Hackett hummed, which somehow made the loss easier to bear. The pipes creaked below and the pumps began an already-lost battle against time. The water stopped its rise and began its retreat and they all strained to hear the tide rolling out, revealing more junk to be cleaned out and put into piles of yes, no, maybe. Mason passed out trash bags, one for each of them.

Bonita Springs

Rae Breslin thought of Florida as hell's humid doorstep. Hurricanes and mosquitoes, alligators and swimming snakes, the city of Miami. It would be underwater within the century.

Her parents retired there in their mid-sixties, when Greg was sick of trading commodities and Janet was sick of Ohio winters. At five o'clock on the morning her parents left, Rae's mom showed up at her apartment and knocked for a long time. Rae sat up in bed and stared silently at the door. Her mother said she was sorry; she and dad had to go work on themselves. "But you're the real deal, Rae," she said. "You're it. We love you." Then she was gone.

They left the house Rae grew up in, only twenty minutes from where she lived now. Rae used to go over there and nap on the shag carpet in front of the fireplace whenever she wanted—whenever her shit job and shit boyfriend were too much. Her mom would fan her hair out on the rug and comb it with her fingers.

They retired to Bonita Springs, a tessellation of strip malls and parking lots bordered with palm trees and tall hedges. Rae initially refused to visit them. She stuck to the routine and continued showing up to her job at the credit union, which brought in enough money to cover her studio apartment and Netflix addiction. She spoke to her mother on the phone once a week, but avoided getting into the details. She'd say, "*Fine*.

Everything is *fine*." Rae though they'd come back to visit her or realize they'd made a horrible mistake, but they didn't, and after one year she finally gave in.

It was winter and she had a week of vacation saved up from work. She told her coworkers she was going to Philadelphia. Her dad offered to pay her airfare, but she refused; she was a thirty-two-year-old independent woman living on the verge. After buying the ticket, she didn't have enough in her bank account for next month's rent. When she got down there, she intended to convince her parents to buy a yacht and see the world, or open a bed-and-breakfast in Spain or, if nothing else, come home.

Rae stepped out of the cab in front of her parents' place, which glowed in the night from strategically-placed accent lights. Her mother ran down the driveway. "You made it! We missed you, sweetie." She hugged Rae for a long time. Her arms were light and sharp like wings, thinner than Rae remembered. "Your father's asleep, but he's glad you're here, too."

"He's asleep?" Rae said. "It's only nine."

"You know dad."

Rae's parents lived in a peach-colored mini-mansion they'd gotten cheap from a widow who lost everything in the stock market. It was in The Cove Country Club, a community of fourteen-foot ceilings and backyard pools, where the houses varied only in the shades of their peach or blue paint, and whether the two-car garage was on the right or the left. The Breslins' place stood out because Janet had torn up all the beds of non-native flowering shrubs and replaced them with small black rocks. The house appeared to be sitting in a puddle of tar.

"Nice landscaping," Rae said. "Very edgy."

"Oh I don't give a damn," her mom said. "These people care too much about appearances. So I thought, you know, screw it. Some poor guy from the landscaping company shouldn't have to break his back over nothing." She picked up a handful of stones. "The homeowners' association isn't thrilled, but we can enjoy it while it lasts." She threw them up like confetti.

There wasn't much inside the house, just a few pieces of furniture and some inoffensive T.J. Maxx artwork. Rae ran and jumped onto the sage-colored leather couch.

"Comfy, huh?" her mom said. "I got it at an estate sale for eight hundred dollars. It's probably worth eight *thousand*."

Her mother had been picking over the material possessions of the deceased. Florida was even worse than she'd imagined. Would this couch just get passed on and on until some old man had a heart attack, voided his bowels onto it, and forced it out of the rotation?

"Dead people furniture," Rae said. "What a bargain."

"Well *this* should be a cheery visit," her mother said.

"Sorry," Rae said. "Let's go see the pool or something."

The back patio held a pool and a hot tub, both fenced in by the lanai, a mesh enclosure that covered the terrace like a miniature breathable astrodome. Outside of the lanai, only ten feet from where Rae and her mother stood, was a lake. The cage blocked whatever debris might fly in when hurricane season came around, and any horrible monsters that might crawl or slither out of the lake. Rae pressed her face to the mesh, stared into the night, and strained to hear sounds of movement.

Janet went in and got her night vision goggles from the special shelf in the foyer. “Military grade,” she said, and put the headset on. “What do you think?” She did a twirl.

“Very flattering,” Rae said.

“All the good animals come out at night,” her mom said. “Panthers, alligators, armadillos.”

“You’ve seen a *panther*?”

“Well, no. They’re insanely rare,” she said. “But the neighbors’ Pekingese got eaten by one last week. They heard this little bark and then nothing.” She sighed with what sounded like longing. “I went over and asked all about it. They’re very nice people.” She took off the headgear and handed it to Rae.

The goggles were heavy. A white-green light shone into Rae’s eyes. Her mom looked like a zombie, skin a ghoulish green and teeth a grainy black.

The lake was calm, but Rae saw something perched in a dead tree on the opposite bank. “There’s a huge bird with big shiny eyes,” she said.

“Great horned owl,” her mom said. “Biggest owl in North America. It’s probably waiting for a fish or a mouse. Wouldn’t it be neat if we got to see him hunt?”

Did her mom stand here every night, staring through the mesh like a baby trying to fit its head between the rails of its crib? Rae handed the goggles back. “Take a look,” she said. “Straight across the water.” She ran her fingers through her mom’s hair and wrapped her arms around her shoulders.

“Great horned owl, no doubt about it,” her mom said. “Very cool. He must’ve heard you were visiting.”

In Ohio, Rae's mother would wear pajamas, slippers, and a mink-fur coat around their chilly house. Now she wore shorts and a tank top, and shivered in the breeze. She fogged and polished the lenses of her tactical military headset and Rae wondered if she'd made any friends. Their country club held events to foster social interaction—happy hours, themed parties, card nights—but Janet didn't like to wear nametags, so she'd never gone. On separate occasions, both her parents had told her, "At the end of the day, all I want is a friend to go on a walk with."

Janet rolled up her jeans and stuck her legs into the hot tub. Rae went in and changed into her athletic one-piece and did a swan dive into the deep end of the dark pool. The only source of light on the patio was the hot tub's underwater lamp. It cast a blue glow on Janet's face.

"So how are things at home," her mother said. "How's Trey?"

"Trey? Oh *Trey.* We broke up a long time ago," Rae said. "I think the rhyming names got to him." In reality, he'd taken a better job in Chicago and expressed no interest in dating long-distance.

"You'll find the right guy," her mom said. "Or not, you know? Being alone isn't the worst thing. Nothing to hold you back."

"Would you do anything different if you didn't have me and dad?"

"Now? Well, honestly, yeah. I would open a restaurant that serves breakfast all day. Maybe raise some falcons," she said. "I still think about it sometimes. Just picking up and leaving while your father's asleep."

Rae swam to the side of the pool. "Jesus. Are you serious?"

"Rae. Of course I'm not serious," her mom said. "I worked for twenty years and now I get to relax, which is all I want to do. I'll give you both fair warning if I ever consider desertion."

"You didn't give fair warning when you left Ohio." Rae floated back to the center of the pool. "How *are* you and dad anyway?"

"We're good. Thanks for asking," her mom said. "I'm going to get some sleep, but I'm glad you're here." She blew Rae a kiss and padded inside.

Rae woke at eleven o'clock the next morning in the queen-size estate-sale bed. She watched a little gecko moving across the ceiling. She heard her parents talking in the kitchen. A normal day here would be the two of them in a four-bedroom house, cold tile in the morning, Greg watching CNN, Janet reading by the pool. *P is for Preoccupation*. For her mother's sake, Rae was thankful for prolific mystery novelists.

She heard a tapping at the door, then Janet walked in and sat on the bed. "Sorry to wake you," she said. "But it's eleven and we're having lunch with my friend Marnie today."

She handed Rae a list she'd made of things they should do during her time in Bonita Springs: outlet malls, bird watching, beach, walk through nature preserve, good seafood, sit in sun, Marnie Claymore.

"Who's Marnie?" Rae said.

"I met her at an estate sale," her mother said. "She's pretty nice. Anyway, she doesn't like to golf." She'd already ticked the Marnie item off the list. This left a lot to look forward to.

"What if we ate good seafood *during* lunch?" Rae said. "Two birds."

Her mother kissed the top of her head. "My girl is a genius."

Rae sat in front beside her dad on the drive to Marnie's country club. His hair was all white, thinning in back, and his profile sagged; there was nowhere for that face to go but down, down, down. The Escalade smelled brand new.

"Sorry I was asleep when you got in last night, kiddo," Rae's dad said. "We've been worried about you." He ruffled her hair. "Is that a new 'do?"

"Actually, I've had *several* haircuts in the past year," Rae said. "What are you so worried about?"

"It's just limitless worry of the existential variety," he said. "We don't know anything about your life right now. What are you up to? Where are you going?"

"Nothing's new," Rae said. "Except my hair, apparently."

"Then we've been worrying over nothing," her dad said.

The clubhouse of the Pelican Promenade Country Club was reminiscent of an old plantation. White columns; garlands of real white lilies framing every ten-foot doorway; seemingly endless beds of red, white and pink geraniums. It was clean, bright, and beautiful. Greg said it was the most expensive country club in town, full of ex-CEOs, retired and impeached politicians, parents of movie stars.

Rae said, "This is the whitest shit I've seen in my life."

"I wonder how they vacuum the grass," Janet said.

They followed a golf cart path around the building to the back terrace, which was dotted with tables shaded by white umbrellas. There was a fountain in the center with

marble babies and dolphins spitting water in crystalline streams; beyond this lay eighteen holes of Hawaiian-green grass punctuated by manmade lakes full of herons and swans. The tables were occupied by old white men smiling with bulky white dentures, and drinking Budweiser or scotch.

A woman with professionally-dyed hair wearing all white stood up and waved them over to a table. “You must be Rae! It’s nice to finally meet you,” she said. “Your parents go on and on about you, you know.”

“I guess absence makes the heart grow fonder,” Rae said. She was in the mood to be a brat.

“This is my son, Andrew,” Marnie said. “He’s here for a visit, too.” Andrew had on a Phish t-shirt and looked about Rae’s age. He had his shoes off under the table. He squinted up into the sun from his seat and said “Howdy-do.” He didn’t give a shit.

Janet said, “Marnie’s in charge of organizing a big charity event for the country club.”

“I sure am. The Pelican Promenade Country Club Golf Tournament for the Battered Women of Bonita Springs. We’ve yet to find a catchy acronym,” she said. “*Lots* to do. Luckily I managed to finagle Andrew into helping me with the heavy lifting.”

“She didn’t have to finagle me into anything,” Andrew said. “As a battered woman, I have a vested interest in this event.”

“Oh no,” Rae said. “*Ha*!”

“Pretty impressive, huh?” Rae’s mom pointed box the size of a car sitting on the edge of the patio with *Material Donations* written across it in bold black cursive.

“A triumph of modern engineering,” Rae’s dad said.

"We're accepting clothes and stuff," Marnie said, "but we've specifically asked women to donate their used designer purses."

"You're kidding," Rae said.

"It never hurts to give someone a pretty gift," her dad said. "God knows Janet's got a hundred purses she'll never use. Am I right, Andrew?"

"Oh I do *not*."

Marnie sipped her iced tea. Andrew was smiling around at them, clearly entertained. Their heavy iron chairs tipped back and forth on the uneven cobbled patio.

"Sorry," Rae said. "It's just… donating designer purses to women who have nothing. Doesn't that seem a little insensitive?"

"Having nice things boosts self-esteem," her mom said. "And I bet those women could use a boost."

"You know what we *should* do?" Rae's dad said. "Make Burmese python-skin bags and belts and donate *those*. They're an invasive species. We'd be doing good for the women and the planet."

"Quite a box, anyway," Andrew said.

Her mother pinched her under the table, so Rae said, "Purses are great."

As they were finishing lunch, a few golfers and their wives came over. They shook hands and slapped backs. "Who let this guy in?" one of them said. "How's that swing looking, buddy?" In the commotion of greetings and chairs being dragged around, Andrew slipped away toward a door at the end of the clubhouse and waved for Rae to follow. She wasn't in the habit of following rude men into strange rooms, but they were

the only people under fifty in a considerable radius. “I’m going to find the bathroom,” she told her father. She hoped there was alcohol where she was going.

Andrew was waiting for her inside the door. “I figured you could use a breather,” he said.

“This place makes me want to *break* shit,” Rae said.

They were in an empty dining room, all the doors shut and the tables bare. “This place is only open for dinner, so we’ve got it to ourselves.” He walked over to the bar and jumped it. He was agile, even in his bare feet. “What’s your pleasure, Madame?”

“Macallan 18,” Rae said. It was her dad’s favorite.

Andrew took down the bottle and a pair of tumblers and hopped back across. They took two stools and clinked glasses. “To free booze and new friends,” he said.

“To Sue Grafton,” Rae said.

Andrew told her he was staying in one of his parents’ guestrooms for a while. He’d been working ski patrol out west, blasting for avalanches, but there’d been an accident. Someone was on the mountain when they shouldn’t have been. He needed a break.

“Wow,” Rae said. “I work in a bank.” She finished her whiskey and poured herself another. “The scariest thing at my job is homeless people trying to sleep in the vestibule.” She wished her parents had gotten her into skydiving or French lessons when she was younger.

Andrew pushed his empty glass her way. She filled it and set one ice cube afloat. He winked and looked down her shirt. He was harmless. “Careful not to spill,” she said.

When Rae's parents wandered in from the patio, her legs were draped over Andrew's knee. He had one hand in her hair and the other under her shirt.

"What the hell?" Rae's dad said. "Sorry to *interrupt*."

Rae pushed Andrew's hand away, swiveled her stool to face the bar, and threw back the last of her whiskey. "You guys ready to go?"

"Yes," her mother said. "I think that would be best."

Andrew stayed seated and waved as they left. "Nice to meet you guys," he said.

Greg walked ahead as they made their way back to the car, and Janet hung back with Rae. "Jesus," she said. "You're not eighteen anymore."

Rae hooked her arm through her mother's. She was drunk. "Well *you're* not eighty-five," she said. "You don't belong here, mother. Move to Normandy, why don't you? You like pâté."

"If I moved to Normandy, I'd live in fear that the local butcher would give me the wrong cut of beef. Or the wrong cut of *horse*," she said. "Florida isn't so bad."

"This place is the armchair with the ugly floral print in which you shall perish," Rae said.

"We're *happy*," her mother said. "I don't know what else to say. Be happy for us."

When they got in the car, Rae's dad let a silent minute pass before he started the engine. "Marnie and Andrew are coming over for after-dinner drinks tonight," he said. "I thought it was the least I could do after you were so rude and then disappeared entirely. So you'll get to see your little friend again. You're welcome."

Rae looked out the window as they drove; the perfectly-spaced palm trees along the road produced an enjoyable blur. This place was exotic and dangerous in its own way—half-blind old people peering from behind the wheels of their Lincoln sedans, edging across lanes without blinkers and running red lights with abandon. There were panther crossing signs on the sides of the freeways and more birds than she'd ever seen.

They were almost home when her dad yelled "*Hang on!"* and the SUV jounced, sending them jerking into the slings of their seatbelts. Rae's head hit the ceiling.

"*Greg*!" her mom yelled.

"What the *fuck*," Rae said. "Did you just kill someone?"

He stopped the car, opened his door and craned to look back, then threw the car into reverse with his head still hanging out the side. "It's a python!" He reversed over the snake's body, at least seven feet long, tan with golden-brown patches, the scales like pixels, dented and oozing where the tires had crushed it. Greg rolled the car forward again and left the front tires resting atop the body.

"Are out of your mind?" Janet said.

He rolled over the thing a few more times, back and forth, then slammed his door and started driving again. "*Woo,*" he said. "What a *rush*."

Rae turned in her seat and saw the motionless shape in the road. "Is that what you do here?" she said. "Go around running shit over with your Escalade?"

"This is what retirement looks like, Rae," her dad said. He waved a hand at the empty street ahead. "All of this and more awaits you."

He parked in the driveway and went around checking each tire for remains. "Don't want snake guts stinking up the garage. I'm gonna get the hose and give these

tires the once-over." He walked into the garage whistling. It was nice, at least, to see him excited about something. Back in Ohio, when Rae would come over to lie beside the hearth, her parents would be in opposite ends of the house using their respective desktop computers, mouse clicks blending with the crackle of the fire.

Rae and her mom decided to spend the afternoon by the pool and let Greg steam lobsters for dinner. Janet ticked off "sit in sun" and "good seafood." An hour before Marnie and Andrew were due to arrive, she put on her reflective vest and anklets to go on her nightly after-dinner walk around the block. "It's not easy looking this good at sixty-five," she told Rae. "Enjoy it while it lasts."

The Claymores showed up after dark and they all sat around the pool drinking and listening to the insects. Rae and Andrew sat with their feet in the water.

"Want to go for a swim?" she said. "You can probably borrow some shorts from my dad."

Greg said, "Can he now?"

"I always keep trunks in my mom's car," Andrew said. "Everybody here's got a pool."

"So, Andrew. Buddy," Rae's dad said. "Did you see a big snake in the road when you drove up? A few houses down?"

"No," Andrew said. "Can't say I did."

"Well, I flattened it with the SUV," he said. "Ran it right down. So keep your hands to yourself."

Marnie and Janet laughed and Andrew whispered, "Your dad is fucking crazy."

"Right," Rae said. "I'd watch it."

Rae wanted to be seen in something more adult than her one-piece, so she went into her mom's walk-in closet and played dress-up. She dug through thirty years of bathing suits and found a modest maroon bikini that she remembered her mom wearing to the beach. Instead of a robe, she grabbed one of her mom's fur coats, a holdover from the Midwestern winters, soft and caramel-colored. She put it on over her suit and the silk lining slid coolly across her skin.

"Ooh-la-la," Marnie said.

"I'm taking advantage of all the amenities before I go back to my snow boots," Rae said. Andrew reappeared in his swim trunks and got into the water. Rae saw him watching as she let the fur coat slide from her shoulders. It was nice to be desired and it probably drove her dad crazy, but she didn't want to give Andrew the wrong idea. She cannonballed near where he was floating.

"Would anyone mind if I turned out all the lights for a few minutes?" Rae's mom said. "This is a great time to break out the night vision goggles."

The overhead lights went out and the water went dark. Rae swam to the edge of the pool closest to the lake. It was a cloudy night and she couldn't see a thing, just black blurs on a black background. Andrew swam up beside her and kissed her neck. She squeezed his hand, but didn't kiss him back. They hung from the wall until she couldn't tell if her eyes were open or closed.

"Rae?" Janet's voice came from the opposite end of the pool, just above a whisper. "Come here."

Rae swam toward the voice and saw her mother's eyes lit up behind the eyepieces.

"Hop up here and take a look."

Rae pulled herself out of the water. Her mother dropped the fur coat over her shoulders, placed the headset over her wet hair, and flicked the switch. She saw her dad scowling in the direction of the shallow end, where Andrew was floating on his back. Marnie was reclined in a chaise lounge, eyes closed, her wine glass tipping dangerously. Her mother pointed toward the lake.

Rae said, "Oh my God." Her mother squeezed her shoulder. On the other side of the lanai, on the strip of grass between the mesh and the water's edge, was a panther. It was staring straight at her with the same golden reflective disks she'd seen on the owl. It lowered its head and started gnawing on something. Its eyes never stopped staring. Because she knew to listen for it, Rae heard a sound like wet feet in rubber flip-flops. "It's eating something," she whispered.

"I know."

"What is it?" Rae said. "That dog? The Pekingese?"

Janet reached to the front of the headset and rotated a dial. The scales came into focus, the heaping coils of the python's dead body. "I dragged it over here while I was on my walk," her mother said. "I wanted to make sure you got to see him."

Rae was thankful for the hurricane-proof screen. Her mother rubbed her shoulders and back to warm her while she watched the panther eat.

"This place isn't so bad, is it?" her mom whispered.

"What's going on?" Rae's dad called, and the panther lifted its head and took a few steps away to crouch in the grass by the lake's edge, ears flat.

Rae's parents were never coming home and she couldn't blame them. If every day had a panther, she wouldn't want to leave here either. She took the headset off and set it down. With the coat still around her shoulders, Rae slid into the water. She moved to the center of the pool, out of reach, and the fur floated behind her like a cape. When her mom flipped the lights on, the panther was gone. So was the snake. Her mother went around the lanai with her face pressed to the screen, looking for them out in the grass.

"They can't have gone far," she said.

Marnie saw Rae floating. "Uh oh," she said. "Hey Janet? Greg?"

Rae's dad came to the edge of the pool and stood with his hands on his hips. "What the hell are you doing?" he said. "Throw your tantrum later. We have guests."

"Oh, we can go," Marnie said. "It's getting close to my bedtime anyhow." The bitch looked pleased to see Rae in trouble. Andrew was already toweling off.

"Bye-bye," Rae said. "Good luck with the battered women."

Marnie hissed something to Andrew, who smiled at Rae and then followed his mother into the house. The front door slammed and they were gone.

"Well done, Rae," her dad yelled. "Now get the fuck out of the pool." He waved at her and said, "Are you *seeing* this, Janet?"

Rae's mother watched her from the edge of pool, quite calm, if a little sad. She'd never need the fur coat in Florida anyway. She said, "Oh, Rae. Baby."

"You get that coat out of there right now," her dad yelled. "I'm counting to three."

Everything was happening around her and at her, at least for now. Rae wished she were still young enough for her parents to ground her. She started spinning in circles, churning with her legs.

“Come in with me,” she said. “If you want the coat, come and get it.”

Cracked

The last time Pam and Tom had been to Frank and Carol's house was over a year ago for a going away party. Their daughter was going to work in Tanzanian health clinic, so Carol had framed giant portraits of the Maasai people herding sheep and silhouettes of water buffalo standing at the shores of rivers reflecting orange sunsets. She had tribal call-and-response songs beating from speakers hidden in giant grass plants around the house, which overwhelmed any attempts at conversation. Carol said it was meant to simulate a language barrier. Her only mode of operation was meticulous extravagance.

Now Pam and Tom were back for a dinner party without an occasion; the motif was married couples in their fifties. With ten guests milling between the living room and dining room, hungry and running out of stories to tell one another, Carol cooked like mad at the stove and replenished the appetizers without anyone noticing. She created the impression of endless cheese and bottomless spinach-artichoke dip. The guests never found themselves wanting.

Tom said, "Jesus, she makes this look easy. Have you tried the patte? It's amazing."

"Twelve isn't an unmanageable number of people," Pam said. "We used to have fifty people over at a time and things never went too horribly wrong."

"True. We're definitely better than Frank and Carol," Tom said. "Though we

never served patte."

"We were basically kids back then. We set out nachos and brie and a case of wine."

"The good old days," Tom said.

In their first ten-or-so years of marriage, Pam and Tom regularly threw sloppy, crowded big dinner parties for their fellow recently married twenty-something's, including Frank and Carol. They'd cover every surface with hors d'oeuvres, make a turkey, buy a baked ham, and go through several cases of cheap wine. People sat on the countertops, floors, and in each other's laps. In her memory, the guests were young and tan and in love. Couples kissed deeply and without shame. Frank and Carol always stayed the longest, often stayed until sunrise, and the four of them would sit on the stoop and share a cigarette or a joint. The parties were a celebration of youth and love and, at some point, Pam and Tom had just lost interest in hosting them. They'd gotten less young.

Frank came in from the deck and held out a platter of beef tenderloin for all to see. He said, "Just have to carve her up and then dinner shall be served."

Everyone found seats and Pam ended up with Tom on one side of her and Carol on the other. The twelve-top banquet table was glowing from the strings of lights that Carol had woven around the chandelier. The dinner plates were floating on top of what looked like a bed of feathers. Bundles of gold and brown woven together with dark twine, twigs running longways at the top and bottom so the feathers were like slats in a miniature picket fence to heaven. Pam touched the soft down beside her plate.

"I got a bit restless last week," Carol said.

"And you bought these new placemats?" Pam said.

"You know me and my ridiculous projects," Carol said. "*Well,* this time I made a set of placemats. Pheasant feathers everywhere, holes in my hands. Two hours per placemat and absolutely not worth the work." She grimaced. "Do they look *so* ridiculous?"

At moments like this, Pam had to remind herself that Carol meant well and that she didn't *intend* to sound like a waspy bitch. Pam said, "They look amazing." And because in Carol's mind there was no higher compliment, she said, "You're Ottawa Hills' own Martha Stewart."

"Oh, Pam, stop it. I'm no Martha Stewart." She looked like she might cry.

Frank kissed the top of Carol's head and lowered the carved tenderloin onto a bed of bound feathers as though the purpose of dinner was to use Carol's placemats. He said, "Looks good, my love." The steak was an ornament.

There were three toasts during dinner.

Before everyone dug in, Frank made a toast to friends and coming together.

Halfway through dinner, a guy bravely sporting a football jersey made a drunken toast to the Cleveland Browns GM, may god have mercy on his soul.

Carol made the final toast before she brought out the rhubarb pie. She was tipsy and couldn't keep a smile off her shiny, red face. She said, "This toast is to Frank, the love of my life, my cricket. Every day I thank God that I married you, because, if I hadn't, I wouldn't get to eat this amazing tenderloin." The man in the football jersey said, "*Eat* his *tenderloin*," and laughed. Carol and Frank stood up and kissed to the group's awkward cheering. Everyone clinked glasses, reaching as far as they could and dragging their shirtfronts through sauces.

Tom yelled “cheers” with the rest and threw back an inch of whiskey. He said, “Pammy. I think you might have to drive home tonight. Is that okay? Tricky whiskey.”

Pam said, “That’d be fine.”

He said, “Thank you my cricket. My cricket,” and leaned in to kiss her.

She let him kiss her and some woman Pam didn’t know said, “Oh my god. Love is in the air.” Pam grabbed the back of Tom’s hair and slid her tongue across his top row of teeth. When Tom pulled away, he said, “Wow. I could get used to that.”

There was a piece of damp lettuce in the down fluff beside her dinner plate, and Pam realized that feather placemats were as unseemly as a carpeted kitchen. What if she found a fat white grub writhing just to the right of the plate’s edge? She would throw herself away from the table, wretching. “Dear god,” she’d say, shaking and searching for the bathroom. “Maggots. There are *maggots* in the placemats!”

The guests ate on. And the meal, everyone agreed, was top notch.

At the end of the night, as Pam and Tom worked their way toward the coat pile, Carol pulled Pam into the study and closed the door behind them.

Pam said, “Jesus, Carol, what the hell is this?” She was drunker than she’d realized.

“So what’s the word on Tom’s birthday party?” Carol said.

Tom’s fifty-fifth was two weeks away, and the only thing Pam had thought about it was *new golf shoes*. She said, “We’ll probably just go out to dinner.”

“Out to dinner?”

“Yeah. Out to fucking dinner, Carol. Is there something wrong with that?”

"Oh, Pam, come *on*. It's just a birthday party. Don't you think Tom would want one?" Carol said. "Even if it was just a tiny gathering of friends? It's his birthday, for god's sake."

Carol had shocked Frank into tears on his fiftieth birthday. He'd spent twenty minutes shaking the hands of friends he hadn't seen in decades, laughing as he wiped his eyes on the sleeve of his navy blazer. "This is amazing. All of these people," he'd said.

Pam pushed her way past Carol and back into the hallway. "I'll think about it," she said. "I promise to think about it. Thanks again for dinner."

Pam drove very slowly on the way home from Frank and Carol's. She got lost in the tunnel vision of inebriated focus and at some point became aware of movement by her legs. She'd hiked up her skirt to drive and now felt the skirt move against her nylons, the mixed fibers snagging each other and vibrating faintly against her skin. She looked down and Tom's hand was sliding his hand along the skirt's hem. "*Fuck*, Tom!" She jerked her knee away and swerved the car left, away from Tom, who hit his head against the window.

Tom said, "What the fuck is your problem?"

Pam got back in her lane and layed on the horn. She yelled over its whiney, buzzing blare: "I'm trying to drive the fucking *car.* That's my fucking *problem*."

There was a cut over Tom's right eye where his head smacked the glass. When they got home, he stood in front of the bathroom mirror cleaning it, narrowing his eyes at it, sighing dramatically and saying "fuck" every time he touched it. Pam found Band-Aids and threw them into the bathroom as she walked past the door. There was a time

when she would've told him to sit on the bathroom counter while she looked at the wound and fixed it. She would've said, "Show me where it hurts," and made a pouty face because he would've liked that.

She'd slept on the couch, blankets covering her face, and Pam woke to the sound of Tom getting ready for work. She heard him eat his Oatbran and read the news online, his fingernails gently scraping the track pad as he scrolled. On his way out the door, he stopped beside the couch and stood over her for a few minutes. Pam stared into the fleece blanket. She balled up her fists in case he tried to smother her—a crazy, half-asleep thought. She considered punching up through the blankets and hitting him in the face. The sheer nerve of the movement would shock him. Her fist flying up like something out of a calm lake.

For most of their twenty-three-year marriage, Pam had been in the habit of recreating Tom's favorite meals from nights out to dinner. When he ate shrimp dumplings for the first time at Jing Chuan, veins of sesame oil and sweet vinegar dripping down his chin, Pam sat there with her eyes closed, dissecting the flavors and building a recipe in her mind. She felt the elements float to the respective reaches of her pallet and mind, the pangs of familiarity as spices and aromatics and complimentary flavors took shape.

She made soba noodles, Hungarian mushroom soup, pork tenderloin, and when she asked Tom which was better, hers or the restaurant's, he'd say, "Yours. By a long shot, yours." Pam was acutely aware of not wanting to please Tom per se, but to be pleasing in general. *To please* was a transferable, widely applicable ability, like knowing QuickBooks or how to drive stick. In the early years, they'd sometimes made love after

these meals with the taste of her cooking still in their mouths.

She'd never felt more in love with Tom than when they locked eyes across a room crowded with people enjoying Pam's stroganoff recipe, the same one that she and Tom ate the night they had sex on the marble countertop of their kitchen island, which was uncomfortable but exciting. The knowledge that this same meal had culminated in sex was thrilling. It was the danger and newness. It's why marriage counselors prescribe salsa dancing lessons.

Twenty years of marriage had taught them how to hold the line. They spend the week after Carol's party in silence until Pam walked into the living room and turned off the football game Tom had up on the flatscreen. He said, "Jesus, Pam, are you serious right now? Are you *serious*?" His hand was resting under the elastic waistband of his sweatpants.

She said, "I was thinking we could have a dinner party for your birthday next week. It's been a while since we had one of those. We could have a few people over, or a ton, if that's what you want. Whatever you want," she said. "I'll cook for everyone. The more the merrier."

He scooched over and patted the worn green leather cushion of the couch that they desperately needed to replace. She'd have to get more throw pillows to disguise it.

"A party sounds nice," Tom said. "Really nice."

After Tom's football game was over, they went out to dinner. They went to eat at a new restaurant called Opus which, according to Carol and Frank, had the best food ever. Carol left a message on the machine: "Get the butternut squash soup, Pam. Get it—

you won't regret it. Ah! That rhymed!" So she and Tom both ordered the soup. She wanted to hate it and leave a rhyming message on Carol's machine. ("It wasn't that good; I'd go back and order something else if I could.")

Pam remained hunched over her bowl of soup for a while after it arrived. She let her hair hang over her face like a curtain. The dish looked perfect: two fingernail-thin slivers of apple floated on the burnt-yellow surface. She pushed one of the slices under with her soupspoon and held it down until she was sure it wouldn't try floating back to the surface. She pressed until the spoon sliced through the drowned fruit and made a sharp click against the bottom of the bowl.

Tom had already speared his apples with a salad fork and sent them down the hatch. He had a spoonful of soup hovering below his chin. "Oh my god. Pam. This soup is amazing." He emptied the waiting spoon into his mouth and closed his eyes, relishing the flavor. The fork he'd used to spear the apples was sitting on the table; each prong was dripping squash drops onto the starched white tablecloth. "Well are you going to try it, or what?" he asked, a pool of soup threatening to spill from his mouth.

Pam shook pepper over the soup, although she knew it probably didn't need any help, and then took a taste. "Fuck."

Tom leaned his ear across the table. "What was that? It's loud in here."

Tom looked stoned. She half expected him to lean down and start lapping it straight from the dish. "Hey we should serve this soup at my birthday party, Pammy." He said, "You could just make a big ol' pot and people could serve themselves."

Pam said, "Yeah, that's a great idea, Tom. I'll just make a big ol' pot."

Tom ultimately decided on ten guests for the dinner party because he didn't want to put too much stress on Pam. And Pam bought new, tan throw pillows for the couch, which nobody laid eyes on because they refused to leave the kitchen. They milled around the island eating cheese and olives and drinking red wine while Pam stirred her cauldron of soup.

At the very least, she'd managed to make the soup the right color. She looked at her cutting board: a granny smith, a fuji, a pink lady, and a sharp knife. The waxed skin caught and reflected the kitchen's track lighting in white spots, luring Pam's mind into the unfocused middle distance; everything happening around her felt unreachable.

Carol snuck up and grabbed her shoulders—"*Boo*!" Pam started and reflexively grabbed the counter to steady herself, where her hand landed on the handle of the knife. The women looked down at the hand and the knife and the apples.

Pam said, "You scared the hell out of me." She stepped back.

"I was just trying to lighten the mood. Do you need any help?"

"Yeah. Sorry," Pam said. "Could you slice some of these apples for me? I've got to stay with the soup."

"Everything will be fine, Pam. It's just a pot of soup." Carol picked up the pink lady with an air of exasperated duty, as if she was only agreeing to do it for the general welfare of the meal. "How thin should the slices be?"

"Like paper," Pam said.

She cracked fresh pepper into the sloshing pot of goldenrod liquid, adding a sound like radio static to the golf talk and the swish-click of apples being sliced. She turned the wooden pepper mill, churning out the specks and watching them settle like ash over the

yellow surface. The sound of one thousand knuckles cracking.

Tom grilled a small rotisserie chicken and some asparagus, but the big ol' pot of thick, rich soup was the main feature of his birthday feast. Pam stacked bowls beside the stove and Carol fanned the apples around a white platter.

"Dinner," Pamela said too loudly, "is served."

She filled her wine glass to the brim with merlot and wandered into the dining room. The table wasn't quite big enough for twelve people, but twelve people wasn't enough of a crowd for people to wander and eat wherever they wanted, on the couch for example. Pam sat at the head of the table and Frank sat down beside her.

"Aren't you going to eat, Pam? This all looks delicious."

"Maybe in a while," she said. "I filled up on wine and apples."

"A well-balanced meal," Frank said. "Hey, remember those parties we used to have here? When we were young? God, those were the days."

"Those were *what* days?" Pam said.

"The good old days. When there was more ahead of us than there was behind."

"Who knows?" Pam said. "Who knows what could happen?"

Everyone found a chair, their knees and elbows touching at the too-small table. Pam stood.

"A toast," she said. "To Tom. I've now known you for half of your life. Isn't that something? I've loved you for all of it and liked you for most of it. Happy birthday." Everyone said "Happy birthday!" and clinked glasses. Pam had to slurp wine from her glass to keep from spilling it.

Frank said, "Speech! Speech! Speech!" until Tom stood up.

"I'll make this quick," he said. "It's great to be around friends tonight and I couldn't dream up a better bunch than you guys—or an uglier one!" He ruffled Frank's hair. "Except, of course, for my gorgeous wife. Thanks for doing this for me, Pammy. I love you." He kissed the top of her head and said, "*Let's eat!*"

Pam sat back while everyone dipped in their spoons and took their first bites. "Well?" she said.

Carol closed her eyes and let the soup sit in her mouth. Then her eyes got big. She swallowed with a cough and reached for her water glass. "Woah. Cajun style," she said. "That's a lot of pepper, isn't it?"

Frank set a piece of bread in his bowl to watch it grow soggy.

Tom ate at a steady pace. He looked up to Pamela, his eyes pooling with tears from the burn of the pepper. He winked at her and blew her a kiss.

"So which is better?" Pam said. "Mine or the restaurant's?"

"Yours is certainly spicier," Carol said. "It's got that kick."

"What more could one ask for in life?" Tom said.

"What? Soup?" Carol said, and Tom said, "No. Spice."