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UNCONSCIOUS STATES: A NOVEL

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UNCONSCIOUS STATES:

A NOVEL

BY

RACHEL MAY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

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OF

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ABSTRACT

Unconscious States tells the story of three sisters in a rural New England town and aims to explore the class, racial, and agricultural tensions in central Massachusetts while addressing issues of addiction, the choices that three women face in making their lives, and a family's struggle to sustain themselves after a devastating accident severely injures the oldest of the Roe sisters, Mary. The novel integrates the choices of educated women today—between scholarship, family, and work—and the racist underbelly, subtle but pervasive, in a New England town like Bolton, as well as the financial burdens that all families face in a struggling economy. The fragmented, nonlinear structure of the novel is intended to mimic Mary's mental state—a severe head injury—and Junie's attempt to “piece together” the last few years of the family's lives since the accident (Junie is the middle sister and Mary's primary caretaker). The lyric shorts are intertwined with my sense of physical repetition and aesthetics as a sewer and quilter; the piecing of material objects becomes metaphor for piecing a written text. This book is an argument for writing a story not structured around “beginning, middle, end,” but written in a spiral that circles through present and past and culminates in a change in Junie's character and outlook—and then her circumstances and decisions. Junie's change is ultimately psychological—in the end, she finds her voice again.

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An excerpt was published by *Harpur Palate* and nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Alice Munro and Zora Neale Hurston.

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INTRODUCTION:

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE NOVEL AND ITS CONTEXT

Unconscious States tells the story of three sisters in a Massachusetts orchard town. When the oldest sister, Mary, is severely injured in a car accident, Junie, the middle sister, steps in to care for her. The novel takes place three years after the accident, when Junie's over-extended herself in her guilt over Mary, and the family is in financial and emotional straits; meanwhile, racial tensions flare up in town over a series of thefts in which residents believe the Jamaican apple pickers are implicated. The fragmented, nonlinear structure of the novel is intended to mimic Mary's mental state—a severe head injury—and Junie's attempt to “piece together” the last few years of the family's lives since Mary's accident (Junie is the middle sister and Mary's primary caretaker)¹, and to act as a form of resistance against the linear, patriarchal narrative. While online publishing and new media forms offer exciting possibilities for nonlinear narratives—and are modes I explore in other projects—I chose to write this novel as a “conventional” book. This decision has been enlightened by the work of N. Katherine Hayles, Alan Liu, and Marshall McLuhan².

In order to intertwine each element of the story, including found text from Mary's veterinary manuals, information on head injuries and addiction in the veterinary field (Mary was finishing vet school at Tufts), and Junie's translations of a French-Canadian woman's writing, I've relied upon my sewing experiences and my

¹ This work was informed by my earlier research in trauma and memory studies, and how the past can return to us in snippets and flashes. This also intersects with my thinking on combining the real and not-real in the book, as memory studies tells us that we can never accurately reconstruct the past, that memory is its own fiction.

² My thanks to Professor Karno for suggesting Liu's and McLuhan's work.

thinking on the connections between sewing and writing, using analogies of patchwork and stitching to create smooth transitions, the best use of repetition, finding a sense of balance of each element, and establishing continuity of the main plot thread. Craig Dworkin makes connections between the seemingly-patched composition of Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* and the autobiographical nature of historical quilts, which, along with the work of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Louise Bourgeois, and Emily Dickinson, helped me towards my own theory on the relationship between sewing and writing (Dworkin 60). Though, of course, the novel is a work of fiction, it, too, incorporates the daily fragments of life with Junie's flashbacks to the last three years as well as her childhood in Bolton with her sisters and her best friend, Danielle, and husband Gerald.

The writing and editing process that I worked through for my book on modern quilting helped me to think about how to hone individual parts of the book while thinking about the rhythm of the whole and its overarching narrative. One of the challenges of writing the novel has been to create a book that *doesn't* require translation, as Dworkin proposes *My Life* does. While an earlier novel draft was more spare and leaped from scene to scene, I've worked to create smoother transitions between scenes and to spend more time within each scene, dwelling in the details of setting, characterization, dialogue, and action, in order to "invite the reader in," carry the reader over the trajectory of the entire novel with sustained tension and a stronger plot, and deepen the emotional impact of the story.

My experience piecing quilts and making visual compositions has helped me to compose a text of fragments that include the found text—newspaper articles, excerpts

from a veterinary manual, and medical information. There's a rhythm to improvisational quilting that I sought to replicate in my writing in fragments. Just as, in an improvised quilt, the colors and shapes must be balanced, so in a story, the narrative threads must be interwoven in a way that sustains the plot but also keeps all the subplot pieces in balance. I've heard many quilters say, when admiring someone's work, that the quilt has "a lot of movement," meaning that the different sections lead one's eye around the quilt, and that the lines of quilting (the stitches through each layer) add to the quilt's depth and texture. The rhythms of sewing, the physicality of the process, is deeply connected to the movements that a pieced text makes from section to section. Quilts contain their own echoes in forms and color; I tried to include these echoes in language, form, and content, within the novel, so that each piece would feel connected to the other parts. In this line of thinking, I've been inspired by Daneen Wardrop, who wrote about Emily Dickinson's daily shifts between sewing and writing, and how the two rituals must have informed each other. Her handwritten texts look like stitched works, with long stitches (the dashes) and the variously short and long words that are visually strung together.³

Jen Bervin replicates Dickinson's marks by hand-stitching red thread, merging, in a way, Dickinson's acts of sewing and writing in Bervin's own new texts (see Addendum).⁴ In addition to uniting the acts of sewing and writing in her work, both bodily acts (the argument for handwriting—and the avant garde's automatic

³ "I heard a fly buzz," The Emily Dickinson Museum, Trustees of Amherst College. Online. https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/ed/files/poetry/fascicle-flybuzz_large.jpg

⁴ Bervin, Jen. "Detail: The Composite Marks of Fascicle 28," <http://www.jenbervin.com/html/dickinson.html>

writing⁵—might be made here), Bervin also rejects the notion that women ought to abandon the needle for the pen. As Ulrich wrote: “We might begin with Anne Bradstreet’s famous line: ‘I am obnoxious to each carping tongue/ Who says my hand a needle better fits.’ That sentence establishes a creative tension between pens and needles, hands and tongues, written and non-written forms of female expression, inviting us not only to take oral traditions and material sources more seriously....but also to examine the roots of the written documents we take so much for granted” (Ulrich, “Of Pens...” 202). Ulrich uses this connection between pens and needles to argue for a more serious study of historic quilts and embroidery, forms of women’s handwork. But there’s also an interesting shift, today, in women’s engagement with the needle, which is reversing Bradstreet’s rejection of the needle. While women were once oppressed by the imposition of needlework, today, several women writers—Jen Hofer, Matthea Harvey, Jill Magi, and others—are using sewing in their writing. And many more women, from various fields, have become sewers and quilters in the DIY movement. My study of modern quilters began with the question: why are we all quilting now? Many women have told me that it’s a response to the computer, a need for the material and for touch. Others have said that our generation no longer needs to eschew “women’s work,” and that we have the liberty to re-engage with it after we come home from our day jobs; we need to nest, said one woman. Rozsika Parker, author of *The Subversive Stitch*, has been the most influential theorist of embroidered and sewn work: ““Has the pen or pencil dipped so deep in the blood of the human race

⁵ Surrealist André Breton conceived of “psychic automatism,” the “practice of automatic drawing and writing,” which was in keeping with the Dadaist “recognition of random or unconscious method” (Morley 81, 59).

as the needle?’ asked the writer Olive Schreiner. The answer is, quite simply, no. The art of embroidery has been the means of educating women into the feminine ideal, and of proving that they have attained it, but it has also provided a weapon of resistance to the constraints of femininity” (Parker ix). While some women still use the needle to subversive ends, most are exploring its possibilities without the desire to challenge that history, signaling either a moment of empowerment, or one of devolution—perhaps post-feminism—in which we reject the gains we’ve made in pursuit of the old feminine norms. In my own sewing and writing, it’s the tension between the material form of the thread and fabric—and its implicit connection to a history of labor and the global economy—as well as language as a conceptual form (signifier and signified) and its potential as a material form (the object on the page that can be manipulated in different visual modes), that drives me to create.

Just as a quilt can be read as poetry, so a narrative can be read as a quilt, pieced narratives that make a whole plot. As Barthes wrote, the “seam of two edges, the interstices of bliss...occurs...in the uttering, not in the sequence of utterances,” and the gap in the fabric is where one’s interest is piqued (13). While I can’t control the reader’s experience with the text, or the enactment of what Barthes calls “tmesis,” the “rhythm of what is read and what is not read,” I can create a collaged text that reflects the value of nonlinear narrative and the power of white space or gaps (Barthes 12-13). The gaps and silences—the white space—in the novel is as important as the text.

This interest in gaps and silences initially grew out of my reading of Kristin Prevallet’s *I: Afterlife*, in which she uses “empty” parentheses and poetry or short lyric essays that leave a lot of white space on the page, to tell the story of her father’s

suicide. When I taught the book in a creative nonfiction class last year, I was concerned that my students would find the content too dark, or would be turned away by the fragmentation. I underestimated them—or the text; most said that they were gripped by the book and that the white space and fragments intrigued them. They told me that it was Prevallet’s short opening, in which she sets up the narrative with evidence about her father’s actions and the police report on the day that he died, that captivated their attention and propelled them through the book; this set up creates the sense that this a book about a mystery to be solved, but Prevallet undermines the idea of certainty (“this is a story that leaves a wide margin of doubt, a story that is not about probable cause”) and writes at the end of these pages: “But this is not the whole story. The whole story is gaping with holes. The ‘hole’ story is conflicted, abstract, difficult to explain...Regardless, the story has many possible forms and many angles of articulation. This is elegy” (xv, xviii). The story, then, is as much about its gaps as it is about what we know of her father and what he did that day, who he was and who he wasn’t: “I remember when my father was happy, and I remember when he began to disappear,” followed by five drawn lines that replicate the form of a poem.

This book (which I first read when it was published in 2007) and its engagement with loss and elegy inspired my thinking about how to write the novel; I even called the novel an elegy at one time, but then decided that I wanted it to be less elegiac and more plot-driven. In other words, I wanted to keep the lyric language that I associate with elegy, but I also wanted the story that doesn’t typically come in an elegy, a form that’s more poem than narrative.

Of course, this study of texts with strong visual elements and gaps or silences

was deepened in the last few years, when I read the anthology *I'll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing by Women*, M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, the work of Blake and Dickinson, Spero's *The Torture of Women*, and other texts that were part of my comprehensive exams and my independent scholarship. Novelist Carole Maso's use of fragments in the service of a nonlinear but plotted narrative helped me to conceive of a novel that works this way, along with Susan Minot's *Evening*, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (in which time skips and jumps, or short moments are extended for pages), Alice Munro's lifetime of short stories (she plays with time and memory by fragmenting stories and repeating words and phrases), Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek*, and Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands*. I've always believed that the nonlinear narrative is a form of resistance, against the linear narrative that I was encouraged to write in a male-dominated MFA program. This book is my argument for writing a story not structured around "beginning, middle, end," but written in a spiral that circles through present and past and culminates in a change in Junie's character and outlook—and then her circumstances and decisions.

My understanding of such nonlinear narratives, including my own novel, has shifted slightly. While Mieke Bal would argue that these circuitous nonlinear narratives are evidence of "women's time," Belinda Edmondson notes that such "anti-phallogocentric narratives," "so-called feminist writing," which consists of "fragmented, circular, or otherwise antilinear" forms look like the "black novel" and that this may not be a culture- or gender-based aesthetic but an "oppositional one" (326). She writes that "most revered canonical works in the Western tradition arose out of a tradition of 'negative aesthetics'" (326). Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and *Beloved* employ repetition,

nonlinearity, and magical realism to tell the story of African-Americans living under slavery's legacies—but the form of these books changes the content of the story and offers moments of linguistic glory in the course of sometimes bleak stories.

As I discussed at length in my comprehensive exams, I'm intrigued by this idea of oppositional writing—Sarah Ahmed's "willful subject" with her arm raised against the tide—but now, more than ten years after I began the novel, fragmented forms are de rigueur and wouldn't be considered oppositional or radical at all. The postmodern form has become the mainstream form, perhaps coopted from the "black novel" and now part of the mainstream. Such recent novels include Paul Harding's Pulitzer Prize winner *Tinkers*, Courtney Collins' *The Untold*, and Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Story of a Part-time Indian*.

But even more interesting is the influence of the new "hybrid genre" in creative nonfiction, which has been emerging and gaining momentum in the last decade; Nicole Walker and Margot Singer edited the anthology *Bending Genre*, which includes essays by some of these nonfiction writers (Jenny Boully, Dinty Moore, Ander Monson). Recently published creative nonfiction that combines image and text, employs fragmentation or erasure, or dwells between fiction/nonfiction/poetry include Sarah Manguso's *Two Kinds of Decay*, Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* (categorized as poetry but many have argued that it functions as nonfiction), Matthea Harvey's *If the Tabloids are True, What are You?*, Natasha Trethewey's *Beyond Katrina*, Kevin Young's *The Grey Album*. These texts were preceded by WG Sebald's fiction-nonfiction-and-photography texts, *Rings of Saturn*, *The Emigrants*, and *Vertigo*, which have become standard reading in the MFA. Other writers, like Jeanette Walls in her

“true novel” *The Glass Castle*, merge fiction and nonfiction to different ends, acknowledging the “truth” of her memories while allowing for creative tangents or fictionalization for the sake of the narrative.

In thinking about “oppositional” texts and my literary predecessors, I do wonder, with concern, if, as a white woman writer, I have coopted the forms of writers of color, especially in my current project on the historic quilt, which has been so heavily informed by my reading of *Zong!* (the author, Philip, is a black woman from the Caribbean who now lives in Canada). And *Beloved* is one of those books that I read when I was young, which changed my way of thinking about fiction and how elements of the real and not-real could be combined to make a haunted story. That book, along with Borges’ *Ficciones* and Aimee Bender’s *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*, offered new ways of using magical realist elements in otherwise realist stories. Their work inspired how Dara Singh and Mary function in the novel, as they haunt Junie, as well as much of my short story writing, where realism and magical realism are more intertwined.

I’d like to return for a moment to the notion of “opposition,” an idea that Alan Liu explores in his analysis of new media, and to the notion of the body and touch. My decision to create this text as a book, one that would be traditionally read in hard copy (though of course the digital book is always an option nowadays), grew out of my desire to focus on the narrative qualities of the story without the “distractions” of digital tools. While I believe that those tools, including audio, video, and hyperlinks, can enhance the historic quilt project, this novel is about memory and Junie’s struggle to make sense of her sister’s secrets and addiction; the story relies on the reader’s

imagination, to render the stories of present and past “real” in her mind without the aid of visuals and other digital tools. Imagination allows for the blending of real and not-real; it is the space where the not-real *feels* real, where written narratives become images and sounds and actions associated with our senses. Digital tools can, in some cases, help the imagination, but in order to play with Junie’s sense of the past and present blurring, and her struggle to understand what was “true” about Mary and their childhood together, and more recently, Mary’s drug addiction, I wanted the story to remain on the page alone—the page holding tactile qualities that the screen, even a touch screen, does not—for the reader to imagine what’s written, and for the reader to fill in those white spaces and gaps that remain between the fragmented parts. That’s the work of fiction, to tell only what’s important and to leave out what the reader can imagine on his own, allowing for narrative leaps and imaginative embellishments.

Marshall McLuhan argues that the “medium is the message,” and I suppose that’s true of this novel, that this is a work of fiction that combines fiction and nonfiction to question the “truth” of our memories and mythic personal stories. And it is, traditionally, the work of book or story to ask these questions and make these truth-claims (think of Proust’s and Nabokov’s explorations of memory and truth, for example). Alan Liu speaks to knowledge production and the “laws of cool” in the intersection of the humanities and new media (Ch. 1). He concludes that there’s a great deal of writing and “unwriting” to come (Ch. 12). This novel is perhaps, at least in relation to these new media forms, “unwriting,” or a resistance to the laws of cool. In relation to new media, the novel is a retro form, a book, an old-fashioned story that relies on language-as-text to trigger the imagination.

My thinking about the plot in the novel, especially in structuring it for this submission over the course of the last year, has also been informed by my study of twentieth century visual art, which I studied in preparation for my comprehensive exams. In the course of learning about visual art history, moving from the Futurists, Cubists, Dadaists, to Surrealists and Bauhaus, to Fluxus, Conceptualism, Postmodernism, and Pop Art, I learned about each school's relationship to the image and language. While the collagists used the then-new advertising posters and mass media in their work, the conceptual artists used a sense of play to create ephemeral work that lived between visual, performance, and textual forms (Morley 37). The work of the collagists and my study of image-text works has helped me to think through the ways that found text and fictional found text can work with a fragmented but strongly-plotted narrative. Again, the challenge of the novel has been to compose a unified story out of fragments and encompassing the different voices of the found text into a story narrated by one woman. The solution that I've found is to include in the beginning of the novel these excerpts and fragments in moments when Junie read the news to her sister at the hospital, and to then sparse out the nonfiction and found text throughout the novel, between other chapters and shorts, with mentions here and there of Junie's reactions to those stories, so that the reader understands that these fragments are part of her daily reading and thinking.

My formal study of image and text in art history further freed me to compose my novel in different collaged forms, and to play with the line between fiction and nonfiction. This draft reflects a more liberal incorporation of nonfiction in the fiction.

While I do not subscribe to the view of some in the avant-garde who coopt found text, I do incorporate the nonfiction without citing it within the text; instead, the citations are listed at the end. Emily Dickinson’s handwritten fascicles (published by R.W. Franklin), and Teresa Hak Kyoung Cha’s *Dictée* inspired me to consider the material qualities of the novel. I experimented with different fonts for each section, and played with different visual elements of the text (fonts, italics, small text for titles, bold, etc.). I decided to keep the nonfiction pieces in the same font, so as not to disrupt the narrative and distract the reader with that visual change. However, because I wanted to be clear that those pieces were someone else’s writing, I put those sections in italics, which I read as less disruptive to the eye.

I would not publish the book without seeking permission from Rabbi Ronnie Cahana and his family, as I’ve included his and his daughter’s words verbatim and incorporated his experience with locked-in syndrome into the plot. His experience is too personal, and his language too singular, to use without permission. I renamed his daughter, Kitra, as “Evelyn,” in the novel, so that I could take liberties with her interactions with my fictional character Junie. By renaming Kitra, I could further fictionalize her and imagine her not as the real person I saw in her TED talk but as a character in the fictional world of the rehab hospital where Mary lives. This way, she could interact with Junie, and Junie could learn from her and her family the important lesson of acceptance, which leads her to her final moments in the novel, when she lets go of the idea that Mary will come back to her. She understands that Mary is not coming back, and that it’s time to let go of that hope to which she’d been clinging, and for which she’d destroyed her life—financially, and emotionally, with her husband

Gerald and her friend Danielle.

One more boundary between fiction and nonfiction that I crossed in this draft is the naming of the town. I had always fictionalized my hometown, Bolton, so that I'd be able to take liberties with it in the novel. If it's a fictional place, I'm not bound to the realities, to the number of citizens or particular histories of place. But finally, I changed the name from Horton (which, in any case, can't be uttered without associations with *Horton Hears a Who*), to Bolton. Bolton is a better name, and by giving it its true name, I'm acknowledging how little I strayed from reality. This town is Bolton, from its Main Street of old tilting houses, to its miles of woods and history of lyme mills. And by giving it its real name, I'm placing the novel more firmly in the context of the Massachusetts orchard town with all of the complications—financial, agricultural, racial, class—that that can bring with it. The real town name might also lend the novel more credibility, as it's the foundation of the real that could allow readers to engage with the fictional, the suspension of disbelief.

I've infused many other elements of the novel with my recent scholarship and research in material culture studies and new media and critical race theory. For example, Gerald's character and intellectual pursuits were directly informed by my study of material culture theory and critical race theory. Inspired by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *The Age of Homespun*, in which she analyzes a series of objects to tell the story of early American—including Native American—history, as well as thing theory and the idea of "sounding an object" (I imagined Junie sounding the town as the residents' racism emerged), I allowed Junie to see the town and its miles of stone walls in the

woods through Gerald's cultural-studies-eyes⁶. In the stone walls, he sees the thousands of slaves who dug up and piled the stones; when driving down Main Street, he imagines it as the Native American trail that it once was, which people traveled from the woods of Bolton to the shores of Boston to trade furs for fish during the summer months; and, he tells Junie the story of the Powder Hill house, where all of Bolton's ammunition was stored after it was moved from the church basement in the eighteen hundreds. I hoped to delve further into his study of Native American artifacts, reflecting the view that David Kingery espouses: "Artifacts are tools as well as signals, signs, and symbols. Their use and functions are multiple and intertwined. Much of their meaning is subliminal and subconscious. Some authors have talked about reading objects as texts, but objects must also be read as myths and poetry" (21). And yet, the story of the novel must remain Junie's, and as such, there wasn't enough space to delve further into Gerald's research. This deeper exploration of material culture studies and its relationship to myth and poetry is one that belongs in the other project that awaits, the historic quilt that I've been studying under Professor Welter's guidance. I found myself trying to do everything at once in the novel—incorporating all that I've learned—and had to remind myself that the novel has to take its own form, and that its job is to tell a story, Junie's story.

Part of Junie's story is her understanding of Bolton and its history of oppression in the battles of British and Native American tribes, as well as slavery, and the current

⁶ The concept of "sounding an object" is WJT Mitchell's, as defined in *What Do Pictures Want?* There, he writes that we can "sound the idols," and "transform its hollowness into an echo chamber for human thought" (27). He speaks to the power of images to reveal racism, the "knotting of the double-bind that afflicts both the subject and object of racism in a complex of desire and hatred" (34).

events with the tensions between year-round citizens and seasonal workers. In earlier drafts of the novel, the only residents of color were the Singhs, an Indian family whose daughter drowns and later “haunts” Junie as an adult. But I always felt as though I had silenced other people who lived in the town by rendering them invisible, and I didn’t want to create a fictional almost-all-white world. I’m quick to criticize books and pop culture, like Lena Dunham’s *Girls*, for not including any characters of color in a diverse city like New York. I didn’t want to be tokenistic in incorporating a few characters of color; I wanted to explore and, in writing about it, resist New England’s quiet but ever-present racism. My research of the historic quilt has taught me that slavery and slave trading in the north was just as bad as in the south, and I know from my childhood in New England that this place is just as segregated and racist as any other in the country. Furthermore, recent events around Trayvon Martin’s and Michael Brown’s murders have prompted me address and research more deeply our country’s racism, including Boston’s segregation and discrimination.

This investment in speaking to racism began when my family moved from rural Bolton to predominantly-white and upper-middle-class Concord; my parents hosted two METCO students who were daily bused to Concord from Roxbury and Dorchester. In high school, one of those boys became a good friend, and I was acutely aware of the differences in our lives. I was never allowed to go his home; my parents wouldn’t even drive him home one night after a Boston College basketball game, for fear that we’d be in danger in his neighborhood. It was my friendship with him, among other things, including attending a conservative southern college, that made me so aware of—and angry about—our town’s racism and injustice. In my master’s

program, I studied critical race theory, and my more recent reading of Shawn Michelle Smith, Robyn Weigman, bell hooks, Carrie Mae Weems, and Belinda Edmondson has helped to shape and inform my understanding of African-American history, racism, and the ways that the black female body is read in our culture.

To more accurately reflect Bolton’s racial diversity and address New England racism, I included more minor characters in the novel and developed the sub-plot of the Jamaican workers. My research of the orchards in New England led me to the stories of H2A agricultural workers who come to the area every year to pick apples. And, I read many stories of migrant workers—Mexican and Central American—who have been mistreated on California farms and New England blueberry farms. I incorporated some of this into the story of the Jamaicans on Danielle’s farm, and allowed the racial tensions that live just below the surface in most small New England towns to erupt when Bolton experiences an increase in thefts. This ire was inspired in part by the burning of a church in western Massachusetts when Obama was elected, and the many racist Tweets by Bostonians when an African-American Canadian player scored the winning goal against the Bruins, as well as the many comments and incidents that I’ve heard and witnessed over the years: an African-American man is followed through an empty bookstore by the owner in a small New Hampshire town; a white girl asks if she can feel a black boy’s hair; my cousin says that my biracial infant nephew will surely be a good basketball player. In considering these influences, I think of Barthes, who wrote: “Isn’t storytelling always a way of searching for one’s origin, speaking one’s conflicts with the Law, entering into a dialectic of tenderness and hatred?” (47).

In order to become an integrated part of the novel, the sub-plot around the pickers had to meld with the main plot, Junie's struggle to let go of Mary and her escape into Tony. So, Bruce, one of the high school orchard workers, implicated the Jamaicans in a theft, and also saw Junie in the woods with Tony. Junie saw Bruce steal the bike that implicated the Jamaicans. By revealing her knowledge about the bike to Danielle, she knows that Bruce will tell everyone about her supposed affair with Tony (Junie justifies the time with Tony to herself because she and Tony are never physical, but the town believes that it was an affair). Rumors spread about Junie, and now that Gerald knows about Tony, she and Gerald break apart and each hit their thresholds: Junie goes to the tree that Mary's car hit and tries to cut it down, while Gerald goes out with Ed (his neighbor) to get drunk and hunt the coyotes that Danielle's tried to save all summer.

In addition to considering gender and opposition in composing the form of the novel, the content reflects much of my thinking on the history of feminism and the choices of educated women today—between scholarship, family, and work—and (as I've explained) the racist underbelly, subtle but pervasive, in a New England town like Bolton, as well as the financial burdens that all families face in a struggling economy. Junie works full-time, has primary care-giving responsibilities for both her daughter and sister, and has sacrificed her own intellectual pursuits so that her husband can pursue his career as a material culture scholar who studies Native American tribes in

the midwest⁷. Junie's life mirrors a culture in which women are still responsible for the majority of the housework even while they maintain careers (McVeigh). While the novel is full of action, Junie's change is the focus of the book; that change is ultimately quiet, and psychological in nature—in the end, she sheds her caretaker role and finds her voice again⁸.

My writing about the three sisters and their different choices regarding career, children, and marriage has been inspired by the interviews that I did for the modern quilting book. The quilter-bloggers whom I've studied expressed frustration with their limited choices. Of the eighty women that I interviewed, the majority told me that they left the workplace in order to care for their children, then found a hole in their social, work, and creative lives, and used quilting and blogging to fill that gap. Some then became quilting entrepreneurs, with small businesses or sponsored blogs, but very few are able to support their families on those businesses in the same way that they could in the mainstream workforce. Thus, they've found an option that allows them to care for their children and continue working part-time from home—but this is a limited choice, as Corrigan notes of the characters' choices in *The Newlyweds* (which I'll discuss momentarily).

⁷ Professor Welters gave me feedback, in response to the first fifty novel pages, about Gerald's career as a material culture scholar.

⁸ In the Spring of 2012, I wrote an essay on nonlinearity and lyric writing, a paragraph of which I adapt here, in order to contextualize my thinking on resistance and lyric, informed by the work of Claudia Rankine and Juliana Spahr in *American Women Poets of the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*.

In addition, men are often venerated for writing realistic stories of domestic life, while women are seen to be writing “chick lit” when they do so. In 2012, Meg Wolitzer spoke to this problem in an article in the *New York Times*:

Bringing up the women’s question — I mean the women’s fiction question — is not unlike mentioning the national debt at a dinner party....When I refer to so-called women’s fiction, I’m not applying the term the way it’s sometimes used: to describe a certain type of fast-reading novel, which sets its sights almost exclusively on women readers and might well find a big, ready-made audience. I’m referring to literature that happens to be written by women. But some people, especially some men, see most fiction by women as one soft, undifferentiated mass that has little to do with them.

She goes on to cite Eugenides’ *Marriage Plot* as a book that gained much acclaim for its accurate depiction of domestic life, while women who wrote similar narratives were barely acknowledged in the literary world. Following this article in the *New York Times*, on April 20, 2012, was a letter to the editor, calling for women to review more women: “To the Editor: Wouldn’t it be interesting to know how many men read Meg Wolitzer’s essay? Since most literary fiction by women is typically reviewed by other women, Wolitzer might have gone on to challenge the *Book Review* to change this pattern.” The VIDA count editors argue that both men and women critics must review men and women’s writing. Becky Tuch, editor of *The Review Review* website, then published an article on the acceptance rates of men’s versus women’s work in literary journals, asking if the problem is that women need to submit more often. Again, the VIDA collective argues that it’s not a question of the amount of submitted work but that more women’s work must be accepted from that available pool.

Maureen Corrigan’s review of Nell Freudenberger’s *The Newlyweds*, serves as just one example of the problem that’s raised in the letter to the editor:

A sense of dead-ended-ness pervades *The Newlyweds*, a shrugging recognition that America and the modernity it embodies may offer young women like Amina more possibilities, but not endless ones. *The Newlyweds* is a luscious and intelligent novel that will stick with you. Sometimes wunderkinds like Freudenberger really deserve all the hype and hoopla, and, somehow, despite literary sexism and sniping, they manage to keep the wonderfulness coming.

Much was made, in this review, of the cover of *The Newlyweds*, two birds' heads, which resists the typical cover of women's fiction; most often, women's books feature a woman's body on the cover. In this way, Freudenberger's book presents itself from the cover onward as literary fiction rather than women's fiction. And yet, her characters face "limited" choices. This is not entirely reflective of women's choices in the US but of women in a global economy, connected to the US and the rest of the world by the web. The main character, Amina, is from India and found her American husband online. After corresponding for months, she believed that she was in love with him and accepted his proposal of marriage; she moved to the US and promised to bring her parents over as soon as she married. Even after she discovers that her husband is not all he seems to be, she marries him so that her parents can immigrate.

While Freudenberger speaks to the possibilities that the US offers to immigrant women, I've focused only on American women, the scope of my own experience and observations, and research on migrant workers. *Unconscious States* is literary fiction in a domestic setting, attempting to tell the truth of women who both work and care for children and the home, even as they resent it or wish it were otherwise—and eventually make that change for themselves and their families. Junie's sister, Mary, eschewed committed relationships and family life, focusing intensively on her own

career, first earning a law degree at Harvard and then a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree at Tufts. Before the accident, Mary tells Junie that she's giving up an intellectual life by marrying Gerald and having a child, and now, three years later, Junie wonders if she was right—does she have to give up family to pursue her career and passions? Can she have both, and if so, how? Stella, the youngest sister and also a significant character, lives in New Mexico and works as a textile artist. She lives with her partner Merle, and while they make little money, they are able to pursue their artistic passions. She, like Mary, has no plans for children. Stella is a lesbian, but that fact is merely incidental in the novel; one question that I have is whether or not I need to more fully describe her past, or her parents' and the towns' reception of her coming out; as I so deeply address issues of race, do I also need to address issues of sexuality and gender? Can her sexuality be incidental, rather than a focal point? I hope that it can be. And yet, Junie is surprised when Stella, always less traditionally-minded, wants a “white wedding,” and wonders what Mary, the most radical in her rejection of patriarchal institutions, would have made of Stella's choice. Junie has clearly read Irigay's “This Sex Which is not One,” as she reconsiders marriage and the notion that it's simply a commodity exchange, in which women are the objects of value. And, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity informed my creation of Danielle, who I imagined as a sort of ‘butch’ straight white woman. She runs the business and does the manual labor that the orchard requires, her hands are strong and calloused, and she dresses in jeans, plaid shirts and workboots. Furthermore, she's loud and outspoken, and lacks the self-consciousness that Junie sometimes exhibits, especially about her body. In contrast, Danielle's husband Terence is more soft-spoken and introverted,

preferring to stay in the background; he's a lawyer but never wanted to litigate because it would put him in the spotlight. Thus, I played with their gender identities and how they function as a straight—but slightly queered—team. Danielle and Stella encourage Junie to return to the work that she loves and to let go of the burden of caretaker that she's taken on, a role to which women are typically consigned in our culture. Junie struggles to find the balance between her family and her passion—translation—and ultimately has to choose to let go of Mary in order to go back to school and translate again, and focus on her marriage and her daughter, a difficult balance even without the care of her injured sister.

In addition to Freudenberger, many contemporary women writers have served as inspiration and models in terms of content, posing a range of questions about women's place in society and family today: Alice Munro made a career of writing literary stories about women; her work was the focus of my MA thesis, in which I strove to understand her replication of memory and time in her narratives. Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* tells the story of an embittered woman in Maine. Amity Gaige's *The Folded World* explores a haunted marriage; Jamaica Kincaid's *See Now Then* tells the story of a family in New England; Carol Shields' *The Stone Diaries* focuses on a family in a rural setting.

The questions and challenges that women writers face today are gaining attention in the media, and it's my hope that *Unconscious States* will add to this conversation about women's choices. In 2009, just a few years before Wolitzer's article in the *Times*, the VIDA counts were established online to track inequities between the publishing of men and women. In the last few years, with the

accumulation of several years' counts and increased attention in the literary community and the media, the VIDA counts have called for—and in some cases, created—change in the publishing industry's biases. In 2012, the Facebook page “Binders Full of Women Writers,” named of course after Mitt Romney's blunder, when he sought to hire a woman and was handed “binders full of women” (binders with pages of resumes) who might be eligible for the job. The Binders Facebook group was established to provide support for women writers, with postings on opportunities, new books, mentorship, and a forum for question-and-answer. The group is private so that the conversation benefits and protects the circle of women writers.

These online forums provide mentorship for women writers and challenge the status quo of the publishing world. While I've chosen not to publish this novel in a new media format, I do rely heavily on these online communities for information about publication, publicity, and current trends. I also try to support women writers and writers of color by buying their books, publishing reviews and interviews, and sharing knowledge online.

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS FOR US

“It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality.”

- Virginia Woolf

“I am living in a broken world, and there is holy work to do.”

- Rabbi Ronnie Cahana

I.

NAMES FOR UNCONSCIOUS STATES: A severe brain injury is one that typically causes an unconscious state or coma, generally lasting no more than a few weeks. When they do not result in death such injuries are catastrophically disabling, and family members often have many questions: about terminology, determining a prognosis, health consequences, and what types of care are available. This booklet aims to help families understand what is happening to their loved ones in the days, weeks, and months following a severe brain injury. A list of additional sources of information is included for the unanswered questions that remain.

*

WHAT IS FOR US

In the night, Gerald breathes beside me. In and out. Slowly. He is a child in sleep, both arms tossed up beside his head, legs sprawled out across the bed. He wears blue pajama pants and an old red t-shirt from his softball days. He stopped playing when Amanda was born, threw out his back picking her up from a bath. He fell down on the

tile floor with her in his arms, shielded her from the fall with his shoulders. He fell at an angle and threw out a disc. He was nutty on drugs for a week, and then they fixed it with lasers. Zip, zap, the back is fixed. But not enough to play softball again. The bat swinging, he says, is terrible.

He breathes deeply and the clock radio to his right plays all night—a buzz of words that comes crackled over the air. These are men’s voices. Talk radio. Gerald picked up the habit when he was young. He’d play the radio so he didn’t have to hear his parents fighting, and now, he can’t sleep without it. When he wants me to laugh, he whispers, Willie Nelson says *the silence is deafening*.

What do we think about the death penalty? the men ask. What do we think about Obama’s proposals for welfare reform? What do we think about the Red Sox last season—will they ever make it to the World Series again? And then, late in the night: What do we think about our own souls? Are we going to make it to Heaven or are we damned to Hell? Think on it, friends, they say, make those tough choices, *be good*.

Gerald breathes beside me, dreaming, legs twitching. Sometimes, he moans. One night, he said, Marilyn, take your hand off my thigh. And another time, last July, he said, You are my one and only, Joanie. When we woke up in the morning and sat down for coffee, I said, Who’s Joanie? And he said, Only Joanie I know is Joni Mitchell, and I said, Ah, the one and only. Gerald looked at me funny. I laughed to myself, touched his knee, kissed him on the outer edge of his dark eyebrow. Things were better then.

The sun fell through the bay windows. It was summertime, and I wore my blue robe, cotton, and Amanda woke up an hour later. By then, Gerald and I had slipped back to the bedroom to make love. We were naked. We were lying there together, arms around each other, skin pressed close, in the darkness of our orange-curtained bedroom, warm, and then Amanda's voice, talking to herself in a wordless babble, floated in to us like a dream, as if she were someone we knew from another life.

Gerald snorts, rolls over and opens his eyes. He looks right at me and says, Is there any more chocolate for me? How come you always eat all the chocolate? Here we go, take a right.

He sighs deeply and stares at me like he's waiting for an answer. He touches me with one large hand, strokes my cheek. Outside, there's a late May rainstorm, wind blowing hard across the corners of the house, a howl. The loose storm window rattles in its frame.

You're not supposed to wake up sleep-talkers or walkers. I learned this as a girl, from Stella, who walked all over the house while she slept. She went to the kitchen one night to clean out the fridge, she said, emptying out every shelf—lettuce and tomatoes and leftover spaghetti on the hardwood kitchen floor. Only the refrigerator light was on. It cast a rectangular glow on the floor, lit up the vegetables and tupperware and the tops of her feet and her face when she leaned in to get more food, curly blonde hair brushing her arms. I went and got Mary, the oldest, who came down and put Stella back to bed.

Gerald stares at me, half there. He doesn't even know who I am right now. Would not remember if I told him that I regret this life, that I wish we had gone to

Minnesota, that I wish I had stopped Mary all those years ago just before our wedding, that I want us to live differently than we do. There is so much for us, I think, and here we are, where we always have been, in Bolton.

Gerald has brown eyes and his hair is tousled against the pink flowered pillowcase and his red shirt has ridden up to his chest. The men on the talk radio chuckle about a joke one of them made—the Sox will never make it, Obama is not who we wished him to be, who knows. It is all just background noise. The wind blows hard again. The window rattles.

* * *

IN FEBRUARY SNOW

There are streets in this neighborhood that we cannot go down. My mother says it's because they are dangerous, and Tony's mother says it's because they are no fun at all. No one lives on two of the streets – it is just woods and places for people to park when they hunt – but on the last street, the nuns live in their black and white costumes. Nuns pray all the time, says Tony, that's why they wear black and white, because it's so boring to always talk to God. He knows because he's Catholic. I told my mother that and she laughed. Behind the nuns' house is where the crazy Williams brothers live, Leonard and Shane. Mom says Leonard doesn't have all his capacities, and whenever I ask what that means, she just says: You see him, you run.

Tony tells me that we should go down those streets and I say, No Way, Jose, Are you crazy? You know what my mother would do? And Tony says, Oh come on, don't be a baby. When he calls me a baby I almost say Okay, because Tony wants to be friends with The Circle, where girls are not allowed. They are starting to like him and invite him to play their recess games: suicide, little pink ball that they bounce against the brick wall, trying to hit each other on the rebound.

After school, we get off the bus and Tony's brother Dom gets off behind us and says, See ya, suckers, and walks away to their house, down the hill. Tony and I walk to my house. It is wintertime. Our breath comes out in poofs in front of our faces like something for us to follow, and our boots make a squeaking sound in the snow underneath us. The sound echoes back to us and the whole world is hushed, as if we are in our own big bubble, glass hovering all around us like a nest.

That means it's dry snow, says Tony.

I smile, twisting my feet back and forth to make the sound over and over, and then Tony smiles and does it, too, and that's how we get most of the way uphill: squeaking and laughing.

Sounds are so much bigger in the winter cold. Dad says it has to do with sound waves. He explained it all one night, because this is what he teaches, things about sound and how fast balls fall from the sky. I sat there and listened and then stopped listening and started thinking about where I would build the next snowfort. One day Tony sat and listened to the whole thing in the living room, leaning back on the couch with Dad and heehawing over physics. I tried again after that, but I still couldn't do it. I kept thinking of other things.

When we stop squeaking and stand still, the cold air around us is so quiet that I think we must be the only ones alive in it.

You want to see the nuns' house today? says Tony when we pass their street at the top of the hill.

No, I say. We'd leave footprints and people would know it was us.

No way, he says. Come on. The Clint Eastwood cowboys would do it.

I look at Tony and his red hat that squishes his hair into his eyes and his blue snowpants and his Rocketman backpack that's always more full of rocks he found or dead bugs for studying or plants he liked the look of, than it is of books from school. He smiles and his rosy cheeks turn into rounds, and the same roundness grows inside me, a held breath, a hiccup waiting. I don't want to say no today, because I want to be wild like the cowboys, and I want Tony to see how brave I am so he doesn't leave me for The Circle, so I say, Yeah, okay, we can go halfway.

We turn down the street on the right and I try to stop my feet from squeaking.

If my mom finds out, I say.

What will she do? he says. She'll scold you is all. If I get in trouble, I'll be grounded for two weeks.

I stop in the middle of the road and look around. But it is so quiet. The snow is so white. Nothing has been touched. No one has even driven this road today; the tire tracks are almost all the way filled in.

I follow Tony. I watch his red hat bob up and down and I tell myself it's okay, that nothing bad will happen because we are only going halfway. That the nuns won't mind seeing us, anyway. That Mom and Dad were wrong about us bothering them.

Around the bend in the road, we see the house. It is white with a big flat face and six windows in front. It has a row of round bushes out front that are so short they don't even come up to the bottom row of windows. They are all just the same size. They are all just the same shape. The snow has covered them all just the same way: lopsided foot-high caps.

No one's plowed the driveway, I say. And the windows are all dark.

There's a pile of garbage in front of the house, like the nuns are waiting for someone to come and take it away. There's no snow on it at all. They must have just put it out.

And then, the wind blows. And a light comes on in the house. And a piece of paper flies off the pile of trash and toward our feet, and Tony picks it up. It is crumpled in his hand. We hear something behind us, a rustle, and my heart stops beating and I turn to see what it was. The branch of a pine sapling is shaking, the snow falling from its branches in a little fluttery cloud. And far away, I see a rabbit hop into the trees.

Chicken, Tony whispers, and I realize I'm holding onto his arm. I drop it fast, thrust it toward his hip. He grins and points to the house.

The three big windows in the front of the house don't have any curtains or any blinds. They are just wide-open glowing-yellow for the world to see. Inside, there is a big oval dining table and a gold chandelier and a red Oriental rug, like the one Tony's parents have in their living room, which my parents say was made by children in India. Two nuns in jeans and sweaters (*plain old jeans and sweaters!*) are setting steaming dishes of green on the table, and another walks in with her blonde hair

falling across her shoulders, and she sets a chicken down there, too. None of them wear things on their heads, or long black dresses, or beads wrapped around their hands. None of them are praying. None of them look angry or lonely. They are just a big family having dinner, living in their cozy house. The windows cast a yellow glow onto the snow-covered bushes outside, like the house is trying to leak some of its warmth to the rest of the cold, cold world.

And then a sound ruptures the sky, breaks our glass globe, shattering it into tiny white pieces that fall all around us, heavy. We are running fast, a sound so loud in our ears that we don't quite know what it was, but it has propelled us forward, without thinking, back down the drive, away. Tony's grabbed my hand and saying, Go! Go! Faster! We tear down the driveway, boots pounding through the snow, my feet slipping around inside my boots, but I can't stop, the sound behind us rolling out and out in the air like ripples in a pond after a rock's been thrown. And then, a high, sad wail sings underneath that echo and rises up, lingers for a moment, fades away. Somewhere, a mitten falls off my hand, and the air grips my skin in prickles as I run. We keep going, the trees racing past us in a blur. The road getting closer and closer and finally coming into view.

Behind us, a woman's voice screams, Leonard, get off our property! Leonard, *dammit*, leave those animals alone!

Tony and I look at each other and his face is all stretched out into scared, and I keep running hard. He pushes at my back with his hand, keeps it there the whole way down the road, and then around the bend. When we are on the street and the nun house is gone behind us, we both start screaming and screaming. We scream so loud and for

so long that it hurts my ears and my lungs burn and I think everyone in the world must have woken up.

They were shooting at us! says Tony. They have a guard who saw us and tried to kill us!

No, I say, all out of breath, they were shouting at someone.

Leonard, says Tony. They thought we were Leonard.

It doesn't fit right, but I can't think of what happened right now, because everything is blurred and I am panting to catch my breath. I look down and see Tony's hand still holding the paper, clenched tight around it.

I touch his hand and pull it open. There in his palm, on top of the mittens his mother made for him last year with the Superman sign—big triangle around an S—on the other side, is the crumpled up paper from the nun's trash. It is like a prize before us. It is like a trophy we won at the Summer Fair there in his hand.

What do you think it is? Tony says. He looks at me, his cheeks all red from running, his hat starting to fall off his head.

I don't know, I say. Part of a Bible, I bet.

Yeah, he says, or some kind of potion for casting spells.

That's witches, I say. Geez. Don't you know?

Oh, says Tony, Yeah, of course I know.

Open it, I say.

He hands the paper to me and crosses his arms over his chest and slides both hands under his armpits to pull off his mittens. He holds out one hand to take the paper back from me, and then, he carefully, slowly unwrinkles the paper. We both look

down at his hands, waiting for The Big Secret to pop up in our faces, for us to see the magic of the nuns in his hands, for God to come down and strike us with something bad – snowstorm lightning. That only happens when the world's all askew, like the frogs Tony's mom told us about. A frog rainstorm. Lightning and thunder in the winter. Punishments.

And then, we see. It's pictures of women in their underwear posing in little squares. Numbers in a row along one side, listing the prices and what the bras and underpants are and how much they cost.

The nuns are pervs, says Tony.

It's a catalogue, I say. My mom has ones like these.

No, says Tony, They're total pervs. They look at nudie pictures. I'm telling everyone at school.

I still think Tony's wrong, but he likes the idea of the perv-nuns and how he will tell everyone at school and it will be such a good surprise for them and how he will hold the paper out for everyone to see and go, Ohhhh, and, No way, and, Wicked cool.

So I watch him fold it up and put it in his pocket and save it up delicious in his mind.

Tomorrow at lunch, he says. I'll tell them how we *both* found it.

Thanks, I say, because it is a big thing to share.

And how they tried to kill us, he says.

But I don't think that's what it was, Tone, I say.

It *is*, he says. We were just like Clint, *renegades in a foreign land*.

He quotes from the movie now, and I know there's no arguing with him, because once Tony's decided something in his mind, that's it.

We walk the rest of the way home, past the blue Singh's house and the Robichaud's where the scary dog lives. He barks from behind his invisible fence, and even though I know he can't get us, I'm always scared. His teeth are so big. We walk past the Dwights where Ricky and Eddy and their mom and dad live with their garden of carrots and peas and zucchinis that they let us pick in the summertime. And the Minors with their eight kids who are older and younger than Tony and me, and who run all over the neighborhood playing tricks on people and singing loud songs on their bikes and being wild and sledding down the big hill that Mom and Dad say is too dangerous for sledding in case a car comes. They all have white-blond hair and their skin turns pink in the first weeks of summer.

Tony talks about the picture the whole way home. He's so excited he forgets to put his mittens back on and when we get inside, his hands are almost blue they are so cold. He makes faces while his hands warm up, because it hurts like pins and needles when they get that cold and then have to work their way back to life.

At school, I get ready at recess. Tony is going to tell the story and I am going to go along with it and say, Yeah, that is what happened. Tony called me last night to make double sure. I said, Yes, I pinkie promise. And then he made me pinkie-shake in the air, and I did, and he believed me and Dom picked up the other phone and his voice was suddenly in our ears saying, Get off, brat, so we said bye and hung up.

So now we stand outside in our jackets and our hats and our mittens and I see Amy and Becca and Danielle, and they say, Do you want to come play on the swings? But I say, No, thanks.

This is the time for Tony's story, and I promised I would tell everyone how true it is.

It is so windy today, the kind of wind that tries to steal away your warm breath if you leave your mouth open for too long. The naked trees at the edge of the yard shake like they don't like it one bit, either, snow slipping from their branches.

I watch Amy and Becca and Danielle race off for the swings and some other kids start a game of tag and someone else tries to make snowballs with this snow that is still way too light and dry for sticking together. And then I put my mitten hands into the pockets of the red jacket I got new this year, and turn and follow Tony to The Circle. He is walking his Clint Eastwood Walk, with his eyes slit tight and his mouth a thin line. I see him trying to make his legs go like Clint's, all rounded and long-stepping.

Hey, guys, says Tony. The Circle stands by the brick wall, shielded from the wind. It opens up when two of the boys step back to see who it is.

Oh, hey, Tone, they say, Hey, man, come on in.

They let him in and then start to close again, but Tony says, No, Junie has to stay for this.

I turn around and see Becca and Danielle watching from the swings, leaning on one of the metal posts. Danielle puts one cupped hand over her mouth and whispers something Becca. They both giggle. I turn back to The Circle.

You know the rules, man, says Albert, who is The Leader.

This is *big*, says Tony. She has to stay.

They don't say anything.

It's about pervs, says Tony.

The boys look at me for a second and then they close up together and whisper and then open up again and say, Okay. One time. Three seconds.

Tony walks up to them and shows them the paper, and I walk up next to him.

They all go, whoa, and dang, and wicked, except for Albert who says, Eh, I've seen that before.

Yeah, says Tony, But do you know where *this* came from?

The boys look at each other. They look at Tony. Tony turns to me. He says, Tell them, June.

I look at them all and wait. The wind blows bits of snow against my face like it's saying, Are you sure, are you sure? But then it stops, like it's letting me have this, and I say: It was at the nuns'. I say it slowly, so they can soak it in, and then they turn – five owl heads at once – to look at Tony.

Yeah, says Tony, They crumpled it up in their trash so no one would find it and it blew over to us. We walked out to their abandoned house and found it and then they tried to shoot us with a shotgun. We could've died.

All the boys shake their heads and say no way and pass the paper around between them.

Right, June? says Tony. He turns to me, his face so happy. We almost died, right? he says. They tried to kill us.

I shrug and look at Tony hard, telling him silently not to ask me anymore.

Come on, Junie, he says. Tell them.

But this is what will happen if I lie for Tony: he will join The Circle. He will forget all about me and how we play together in the woods all summer long and sell blueberries that we pick from the patch by the treehouse, where you have to be careful of the yellow jackets that live in the ground. Already, it is happening. He likes The Circle boys better than me. And if I do this for him, it will Seal the Deal, like Dom says when he's talking about a girl and dirty things that I don't really know about. Seal the Deal. He says it with a wicked grin and a toothpick hanging from the corner of his mouth, Mr. Cool. Mom and Dad are always talking about choices: Make good choices, they sing with their smiles. This is my choice, I know.

Something rises up in me, a hard thing, which is bare and round and made of hate.

Don't lie, Tone, I say. That's not what happened. They didn't try to kill us. At first the words come slow and thick, and then I get mad, that round thing exploding in me, so mad I don't even know I'm doing it, but I say everything fast, in a spit, to all the boys, staring each one in the face. Tim with his wide blue eyes and Jake with his slits-of-brown and Danny with his red hair. All of them with their hands in their pockets and their feet stomping on the frozen ground.

I say: No, they didn't try to kill us. That's just Tony lying to you and trying to seem cool. But he's not cool. He's not like you guys. He drools all over his pillow in his sleep and talks in his sleep, words all slurred. He even sucks his thumb. He wants to be just like Clint Eastwood, but he ran like a chicken the other day when we heard

that shot in the woods. Only they weren't shooting at us. It was just crazy Leonard. Killing a rabbit.

Then, there is nothing left for me to say. I can feel Tony staring at me with all the hate in his body. He doesn't understand. I am still filled up with a strange kind of heat. This isn't any kind of love.

I turn and walk off and leave Tony there with The Circle. I walk right past Becca and Danielle. They run up to me and walk on each side, asking questions, saying, What happened? What was it like? But I am quiet. I keep on going without saying a word. All around, the world is dripping into puddles. I hear each drop land on the ground, the icicles melting, the snow banks shrinking. This is only temporary. It will snow again soon. There is more winter coming. I hear Tony say, She's just a girl. Just lying, and the boys punching at each other and teasing Tony, saying, She looves you, Tony. You sleep with *Junie*? Ooooh! I hear them cooing behind me like the mourning doves that sit on my eaves when I wake up every morning, even on the coldest days when the air seems too thin for sounds.

I see Tony the next day in school, and he is mad. I can see by the shadowy way he looks at me, as if his eye sockets have grown heavier, bluish eyelids half-closed, grin a thin streak across his face.

Hi, Tone, I say, one hand raised. He doesn't say anything back. He shrugs his backpack further up one shoulder, thumb hooked under the strap, and walks away with Jake and Tim.

He's wearing his red and green striped shirt, his favorite because it's soft against his neck. Tony has sensitive skin. So many things I know about him that those boys will never know.

Tony sings to me sometimes, *I love Junie with the long dark hair*. Sang to me. He sang to me. He'd do it as if he was teasing, but he wasn't. There's a way of looking at people that is deeper than ordinary, a way of knowing things that you never have to say. Danielle pulls me away and says, It's hot dog day!

I only told the truth, I say, and I'm mad at Tony for a second, the same way he's mad at me. I turn from Danielle and push open the glass door at the front of the school and walk outside, where it is snowing again, big fat flakes landing wet on my skin. A yellow bus idling in the horseshoe driveway. Two kids with black instrument cases chasing each other, squealing, open jackets flapping; they clomp onto the bus. I stare up at the sky, at the crooked gray branches with their lumps of snow, and I know it's not the same, the way we're mad. I know that what I did wasn't innocent. Wasn't kind.

After I tell The Circle, I don't see Tony for the rest of the day, and when I get home, Mom is making a cake in the oven and the whole house smells sweet. Stella sits at the kitchen table, legs going smack smack against the wood. She has chocolate all over her face, frosting Mom let her lick from the beaters. Mom's frosting is grainy, homemade. Not like the packages.

Hey sweetheart, she says. Tony coming for dinner tonight?

It is Tuesday. Tony almost always comes for dinner on Tuesdays, unless his mom says he can't because he has to do homework or chores or they are going to a movie. But he wasn't on the bus when I came home, and he didn't walk up the driveway with me, and he is not here in the house with me now.

No, I say. Where's Mary?

At Margaret's, says Mom.

I go to the sink to wash my hands. They are covered in melted snow and dirt.

What happened? she says. She touches my hands.

I fell down in the driveway, I say, in the tire tracks. It doesn't hurt.

I don't know why I say it doesn't hurt, because it does. It stings.

Wait, she says, and she goes upstairs for her special homemade cream and band-aids. She comes down and sits in front of me and says, Sit down on the chair, Junie.

I sit and she holds both my hands in hers and looks into my face.

What happened at school? she says. Did you and Tony get into a fight?

No, I say.

Did something happen with your friends? Or in class?

No, I say. She rubs the scrapes in my hands with quick, light touches, like she knows how much it hurts.

Nothing happened, I say.

Stella reaches over and touches the scrape. Ouch, she says. What happened, Juju?

Do you want to call Tony and invite him over? says Mom.

Don't *touch*, I say to Stella. I pull my hand into my lap.

I look at my Mom, how she is kneeling down in front of me, and her hair over her shoulder and her cheeks rosy and how she is sometimes so, so sad for a reason I don't know—the pile of dishes in the sink, the silence of our father in the house, the clink of ice cubes in whiskey—and I feel my chin shake. As soon as she hugs me, I start crying hard with the big sobs like I am a baby, the kind of sobs that give you cry-hiccups afterwards, when you take in three fast breaths at a time and your whole body empties out when you breathe out again. I cry until Dad walks through the front door saying, Hello, family! like he always does, and he finds me and Mom in the kitchen holding onto each other like this.

Mom says, Tell us what happened. But when I sit back and get ready to tell them the whole big story of our Clint-Eastwood-Secret, I can't do it. Because they will be mad about the road we shouldn't have gone down and they will be mad that I lied and they will be mad that we have a perv picture, which is really just a catalogue paper that Tony needs for pretending.

When will Mary come home? I say.

After dinner, says Mom.

I think how I want to crawl into bed with Mary, and tell her this, and what she will say to fix it. She will tell me how to make it better. She will say, It's okay, Junie.

But she isn't here.

I got into a fight with Tony, I say.

Mom says, About what?

Nothing, I say. It's dumb. I don't want to say.

Fight, says Stella, and laughs. Dad swings her in his arms.

Mom looks at me for a long minute, and then she says, How about some cake?

Before dinner?

She nods. I have good news.

She tells me and Dad and Stella about the baby while I take my first chocolate bite. She says how wonderful everything is, how she went to the doctor today before the quilting class she teaches. She still has threads stuck all over her dress—squiggles of white and red and black.

Dad laughs and sets Stella down and swings Mom around in a circle and she laughs, too, and they are so happy that I forget all about the picture and the lie. We dance together in the kitchen and they say, A little brother or sister! And, Isn't it marvelous!

We hold hands and dance in a circle, and then Mom and Dad move into the living room and turn on one of the lights so the room glows honey yellow against the black windows. There is nothing outside; there is only us reflected in glass. We are our own little world in the winter night. They start singing and dancing again, and then I can hear them kissing with loud smacking sounds. Stella dances little circles around them, singing one of her songs – *kickaboo your momma too*.

They're having a baby, I say to no one. Another baby.

Mom and Dad are dancing over the new baby, who will come into our family and make us better somehow—this is what they think, this is the secret they understand that I do not—and Tony is in The Circle now, and I am still just me in this family, and at school, and in the snowy world where the bushes have all gone cartoon-

bubbly from the piles and piles and feet of snow this winter. A new record, sings the radio-man, the most snowfall in Massachusetts since nineteen twenty-eight. Who lived here in nineteen twenty-eight? No one but the deer.

Nothing is the same as it was this morning. The whole world has changed in a slow, all-day flash.

I go to the front hall and stare out the glass window in the door. I flick on the front light so it shines onto the snow on the front stoop. It is so white it looks like sky. I stare at it. I try to guess how many flakes are piled there. It is Heaven, all that glistening snow, shining like diamonds. It is like the song dad sings sometimes, *Lucy in the sky*, the girl who must be dancing up there, bathing in white jewels.

And then, I open the door, and without even a jacket, I run outside, into the darkness, which I have never done. I race down the driveway, feet pounding fast, all alone. The old pines and birches rise up on both sides, silhouette monsters, and I think of the orange day lilies that bloom in Spring along the drive, big heads hanging in a drowsy almost-summer droop. But now, there is snow everywhere, and everything is freezing again because night has come. The driveway is slick and slippery, black ice, but I keep going, running, running fast. I hear Mom and Dad behind me, at the front door calling, “Juuniiiie!” in long, high notes. Mom nearly shrieking.

I don’t know it, but I am running to the nun’s house. I race all the way there, down the dark road we are not supposed to follow, but I do because scared has run out of my body. It is just gone. There is the Singh’s blue house on the right and there is where Gerald and Jason made a fire by the little pond one summer and there is where

Tony and I crashed our bikes one day and had to go to the hospital for our woozy heads. Tony.

I keep on running, breathing hard, racing some ghost-person beside me, who is running just as fast as me, who is angry, who is wild. It is my mad hardened self.

And I get there. To the nun's. All the way down their dark driveway where no one ever goes but the snow falling from the sky. And there they are in their cozied house. I walk, then crawl, sneaking up to the only lit window. There are two of them sitting by a fire. Every other window is dark, as if the nuns have all gone to bed, and so early, at dinnertime. The two nuns sit by the fire, one knitting, both laughing. They throw their heads back against the old green upholstered chairs, probably talking about God and how good it is to know what you know, to believe so hard. That's the thing about nuns, that's their secret held inside their long dark gowns. That's why they seem so creepy. They know more than us. They walk steady and sure. They know their place in this world.

I stare so hard at the window, into that fire in the wide brick fireplace, like it can give me some kind of truth. The flames hop and sway, and it is like I am watching everything I have done today, losing Tony either way—if he's in The Circle or not—and Mom and Dad's dream come true, both of them dancing for this new person who will come. There are all kinds of love, says Tony when he comes for dinner, and Mom and Dad beaming at the dinner table.

I stare into that hot fire, sitting in the snow, one side against a frozen rhododendron bush, my hands on the windowsill. Far away, I hear my parents calling, see a dot of light bouncing on the road. They've come searching.

I can hardly see now from my fire-staring. When I look at the snow, I only see the spots of fire dancing on the white, like a movie screen. I am snow blind, and when I stand up, I stumble and fall, one cheek swathed in sticky snow. Now, we could make snowballs. Now, we could have a real fight.

“Juuniiiie!” my mother screams, her voice a high-pitched strain.

Tony is lost. I am lost. We are all lost out here in the snow, in this glass-globe of a world.

I will see Tony the next day in school, and he will be mad. I will know by the shadowy way he looks at me, as if his eye sockets have grown heavier, bluish eyelids half-closed, his grin a thin streak across his face.

Hi, Tone, I’ll say, one hand raised. He won’t say anything back. He’ll shrug his backpack further up one shoulder, thumb hooked under the strap, and walk away with Jake and Tim.

He’ll wear his red and green striped shirt, his favorite because it’s soft against his neck. Tony has sensitive skin. So many things I know about him that those boys will never know.

Tony sings to me sometimes, *I love Junie with the long dark hair*. Sang to me. He sang to me. He’d do it as if he was teasing, but he wasn’t. There’s a way of looking at people that is deeper than ordinary, a way of knowing things that you never have to say.

Danielle will pull me away and say, It’s hot dog day! all exhilarated.

I only told the truth, I’ll say, and I’ll be mad at Tony for a second, the same way he’s mad at me. I’ll turn from Danielle and push open the glass door at the front

of the school and walk outside, where it will be snowing again, big fat flakes landing wet on my skin. A yellow bus idling in the horseshoe driveway. Two kids with black instrument cases chasing each other, squealing, open jackets flapping; they'll clomp onto the bus. I will stand alone in the snow. Another month later, my mother will miscarry, and there will never be a fourth child. Just us three—me and Stella and Mary—and my mother will weep for weeks, this sadness adding to her already-sadness, and she'll quilt all the time down in the basement, the sound of the sewing machine roaring up at us to stay away.

Now, I sit against the snow-covered rhododendrons by the nun's house, I think of the sound of the rabbit dying – that long wail like a human baby's – that we heard as we ran away the other day. We were so scared of the gun that I don't remember the rabbit cry until now, alone in the dark, when it ripples through me. That sound echoes inside anyone who hears it: a shriek. A high, lonely call.

And as we ran, me holding Tony's hand, our breath panting clouds into the air, and the gunshot echoing, the woman calling out, the rabbit's last cry, and the snow falling light and steady—all these slivers rose together, staying like that above us for less than a breath, a hummingbird pause—then broke apart and fell again, and we were each alone in the long silence that came after.

I stand. Feel my feet so wet inside my boots and my hands cold without mittens. I grab a tree trunk, hand around the rough bark, feet baby-stepping toward what I hope is the driveway, my parents' voices getting closer and closer, the bobbing white light growing as the distance between us shortens.

Finally, I call out to my parents, long and loud, hoping they will hear me. I don't even worry about those nuns hearing, or what they will think, or whether or not Leonard

is out there lurking. Safety is so close. And it's Mary's voice I hear closest to me, Mary coming for me in the darkness. "Junie?" she says. "Junie, here we are." She is coming through the darkness, running in her boots down the driveway. There is her body, a blur of white in the black foggy air. There she is, emerging. Paint smudge against the world, black hair up and down as she runs, saying, "Junie, Junie;" though I can't see her face, I know she's there. Mary is always the one who rescues me. When I get lost on the trails in the woods, when I'm afraid to go out over my head in the pond, when I'm teased by the kids on the bus for being too skinny and clumsy, when I'm lonely and our mother is too sad, then Mary saves me.

I holler back: "Here I am!" and my voice echoes all around me and the bobbing white light is only yards away, and there is Mary, closer, closer, and I keep on going, hands out, searching with my spotted eyes.

II.

THIS AUGUST

Cutting down the tree, I was—and sweat, dripping, and something telling me, *Stop, Junie, Stop*. Mary's voice, an echo on the wind—aren't I going crazy now? Aren't I. But the tree needs cutting. I don't care if it's four hundred years old. I'll do it one chip at a time, hacking into its bark with the saw. I don't care about Danielle's conservation efforts, her rallies and her fucking meetings of the CSA and the trail committee. That little house at the top of Gunpowder Hill Road, where they kept the ammunition in the 1800s? We, the town of Bolton, poured five thousand dollars into saving that ten by ten building. I went to every meeting, and voted, and brought my mother, another attempt to get her out of her depression; she brought the quilt still in red scraps, and she stitched through the meeting with her head bent forward. And Gerald at his meetings, off and away, with her her her, or not with her—or wherever, drinking with Terence at the bars—away, anyway. And Amanda who needs everything from me—I can't bear that kind of love, I'm no good for it now. A car winds past, pauses, a loud carburetor, and keeps going, and it's so hot, August heat, a pressing down upon me, then that little breeze, relief, hair stuck to my face and a sound of crying (myself, I think), and the sound of the handsaw against wood, rough cut, scraping and scraping.

This is a good sound. I can't give up on this. This is what will solve it. This town and its gossip. Tony gone. This place that's held me too tight. All of my failures, a career I let go. My father's death-from-guilt. This tree that almost-but-not-quite-killed Mary. This tree—pushing the saw, the muscles burning in my arms—this tree, is coming, down.

III.

MAGDALENE TETRAULT

My dissertation, to translate twenty of her poems. It would be a start. Then I would do the memoir, then the whole book of poetry.

Lived all her life in *Les Trois Rivieres*, and left only once, to go to the coast with her uncles.

They were poor. They lived in an old farmhouse left to them by her parents. If it weren't for her parents' death, her uncles would have been traveling salesmen.

Boxes full of little vials and pills. This one for gout, this one for bad temper, this one for headaches, this one for female troubles.

In the farmhouse, there was a fireplace and three bedrooms.

Her uncles made saddles for everyone in the county. They were good, and word spread, and people came from hours away to buy their saddles.

This is in French Canada, outside Montreal.

Magdalene would lie on the saddle leather at night, before it was connected to the pommels and the wooden frames. She would lie in front of the fire and trace the patterns her uncles had pounded into the leather. The curly leaves and stems, the round divoted edges of the roses.

She would listen to the river. All her life. On that river. Later in her life, she would survive a great loss, and raise her child alone.

When I translated her then, I thought, what a life! To stay always in one place!
Poor girl!

Well. It is a funny twist, then. For here I am in Bolton, as always, too.

* * *

IN THE POND, SWIMMING

When the water falls across our naked bodies, we moan or shriek or sigh or stay silent – any of these things will do, because it feels so good. Water on skin. The older kids come here to make out, but we don't. We only come for the sensation. Mom says we should enjoy our bodies because one day we'll be old like her, with sore knees and an aching back. She doesn't know we come here. This is sneaking out, in the nighttime when the world is sleeping. There's a delicious feeling to night-creeping when the world has gone to bed.

There are six of us—me and my three best girlfriends and two boys whose names are Gerald and Tony. Last year, Tony got a leech stuck on his penis, just like it happens in that movie, only in real life his mother had to pull it off, and she called our mother to check us for them, too.

No one lives near the pond. No one at all.

Down the road, there is a girl-scout camp where I have gone every summer but will, finally, not go this year because I am thirteen, and a mile away is Paulina

Chepeski's house. She has raven-black hair and dark eyes, and everyone says her mother is a witch.

When we swim, we splash and play and make fun of one another. Sometimes, we'll rub arms with the boys on purpose, just to get a taste of how it feels, testing. We swim all the way out to the raft in the middle of the pond, and the water is cold, and the moon shines down on us, or the stars, or sometimes, once a month when it is cloudy, nothing at all – a moonless night. It's on these last nights that we tell ghost stories.

Everyone says the ghost of the girl who drowned here lives in the trees. Her name was Dara Singh, and she lived down the street from me in the blue house and hardly ever went outside. Her father was sick once, and my mother brought them a casserole. Mom went inside the house while I waited in the car. When she came back out, she wouldn't say anything at all about what it was like inside.

“Normal,” she said. “Just like our house.”

But I didn't believe it. The little girl had blue eyes that stood out against her dark skin, like she'd been marked for something special in life, like she could see differently than the rest of us with our plain old matchy-matching skin and eyes. Mom said then that she'd grow up to be a real beauty, and that her brothers were all quite handsome, that I might keep that in mind for one day down the road. “Ew,” I'd said.

But three years after the little girl's father got sick and then well again, and three years after Danielle's little sister was born, the little blue-eyed girl drowned in this pond. She was only six then, two years younger than me. They said she was on a

ventilator for seven years, and then her family decided to let her go. That's how Mom said it. "Let her go."

The boys are daring me to swim to the other side of the lake now, saying, "Betcha can't."

I look back at them, treading water. "What do you know?" I say. "I've been on swim team all Spring. Wanna race?"

The boys say yeah, and off we go, across the lake, my three girlfriends waiting on the raft, cheering for me. We can scream as loud as we like here, and no one will hear; that's the beauty of it.

We swim, my head in the black water, splashing, arms pushing, fifty yards, sixty, seventy-five, and I start to run out of breath. I raise my head out of the water to see where I am. There is the shadow of trees ahead of me. Mary taught me how to swim like this; at first, I was afraid. Not anymore. It's not far now, and the two boys splash beside me, just behind. I am fast. They'll see. I put my head back into the water, and I swim, pushing hard for proof of what I can do, cold water shushing all around my body, arms skimming my hips and then pushing back, pinkies up and out of the surface, hands thumb-side down at my ears. I fall into the rhythm, breath coming easy as I turn my head every other stroke.

And then, ahead of me, underwater, I see a fish – its white underside swaying. It rises up, out of the darkness of the depths, body bending in and out, fins pedaling, eager, like a child. I follow it all the way to the shore, and when we arrive, it bellies itself out of the water, onto the sand, and grows legs and walks into the trees, white arm waving as it disappears. I stand there,

water falling away from my shoulders, rolling in great drops off my skin, and I know who it is and am not afraid, because this is not a ghost story.

I can see her blue eyes now as if it is the night our car headlights fell upon her white-shirted body, me and my mother driving home, Dara alone in that big blue house, the single yellow light glowing upstairs. That night, all I could see of her face was the divots and round, dark shadows of the hollows, the sharp-edged brightness of her cheekbones, her forehead. But, I could see her eyes in my mind. It's the same now. Those blue eyes. They haunt me. She is a shadow in the trees. She is in the periphery, always on the corners of my mind, even when I think I have forgotten. To my memory, it does not matter that I hardly knew her while she was alive. She will always, always be standing, a white shape in the headlights, her blue eyes looking out at me, knowing something I do not know.

The boys splash up beside me, wade to the sandy shore, stand and catch their breath, hands on their knees.

“How'd you get here so fast?” they say.

I keep watching the woods.

No one could hear them scream that day, how she must have called out as she splashed, how her brother must have called as he pulled her in to shore, her skin so pale it looked blue. It was April, too cold for everyone else to swim. They took a different school bus and got off here. The driver was fired for letting them off without a note, small recompense for a family aggrieved. I wonder how it is for him now, and more, for her brother.

When she was alive, I could tell she had a secret. It was in the way she moved – her hands so full of grace they seemed to float on the air, the careful set of her lips, the guarded blue eyes, the way she would not run and laugh and play with us in the neighborhood after school (those two years she went) but walked home alone, in even, steady steps that could not have belonged to any normal six year-old. She is playful in death, at least.

One of the boys, Tony with his cowboy swagger, steps up beside me and touches my shoulder, a cold shock. He has broad shoulders, and his dark hair sticks to his forehead in thick, straightened strands.

“Wake up,” he says.

I do not know it, but in two weeks, I will kiss him, a sweet, awkward first kiss that will charge my whole body from my heels up through my swim-strong calves, through my spine, to my shoulders and my flushed cheeks.

I turn to him in the night, our skin still shedding drops from the shimmering black pond, and I touch his face, run my fingers down his forehead, his cheeks, over his two wet lips, just because I can, just because it feels so good to touch each other.

* * *

NAMES FOR UNCONSCIOUS STATES, CONT.: Sometimes individuals in minimally conscious states may be inappropriately diagnosed as vegetative. That is because, even in a vegetative state, individuals can at times respond to stimuli; to declare a

person minimally conscious a doctor must find evidence that he or she has at least some level of awareness.

* * *

TRICK

The babysitter girls love to tickle. I can see their searching fingers coming, eager to get at my sides, and I squiggle, squirm away. I squeal – half with the sensation of it, and half with the pleasure of all the attention. It is nineteen eighty-two, and I am seven, and we live in the big house my mother still lives in now, in her old age, alone.

“Look, she laughs before you even touch her,” the babysitter says to no one.

Upstairs, my sister Mary is drawing on Cheez-It’s to feed to the babysitter, who we do not like even though she plays with us. She tips us over on the big blue and white chair in the playroom (which our parents do not allow) – faster and faster – until we shriek and she says, “Bedtime.”

Mary hands me the cracker. “Give it to her,” she says. “This side up.”

I look down at the cracker and giggle, cover my mouth. Then I look up at Mary, her blue eyes steady.

“But what if she dies?” I say.

“She won’t,” says Mary, “she won’t even get sick. I know about these things. Don’t be a baby, Junie. Just do it.”

I’m not sure. But Mary says she’ll think I’m cool forever if I do it. So, I walk downstairs and I lay out three Cheez-It’s on my palm, plain side up, and I offer them to the babysitter. She has a curly blonde bob and a button nose.

“Thank you,” she says. She pats the top of my head. I’d tell her I’m not a baby, but she’s about to eat the cracker.

I watch her, open-mouthed, thrilled. She’s *eating the Cheez-It’s!* Just before eating the last one, she flips it over and sees the blue scribbles of pen. Her eyes become slits, her mouth a thin angry line pulled tight across her face. Then, she roars.

“What’s this?” she yells. “What the hell is on this cracker?”

I shrug and bow my head. I can’t meet her eyes. I cross my arms over my stomach to protect myself and let my hair fall in front of my face. Mary will come down and save me now.

“You little tyrant! You monster!”

Mary? Where is Mary?

“What the hell were you *thinking?*”

Mary isn’t coming down. I don’t hear anything from upstairs.

The babysitter runs to the bathroom and leaves me standing there. I turn and run upstairs, down the hall to my bedroom, where Mary is crouched on the floor in the darkness. She holds her stomach. She’s laughing. Her knees are pressed up against her arms.

“Mary,” I whisper. “She ate it. I’m going to get in so much trouble now.”

“Nah,” she says. “Don’t sweat it, little bird, you’re gonna be fine. Mom and Dad will think it’s funny.”

We hear the babysitter downstairs, spitting, and calling up to us, “Little assholes!”

I turn to Mary, big-eyed. “She said *assholes!*”

Marry nodded, grinning. “We got her. Good job, Junie. I’m proud of you.”

“Shitheads!” screams the babysitter. The water is still running. We hear her splash and gurgle.

Mary laughs, and I cover my mouth—then let go and laugh, too. Mary’s proud of me. The words reverberate through my body.

We sit in our dark bedroom, Stella asleep next door, and we laugh, side by side, so close I can feel her ribs rising and falling with each short breath, as we listen to the babysitter cleaning out her mouth, rinsing and spitting and rinsing again, cursing us in between rounds.

* * *

PALM UP

At the Jones Rehab Center in Bolton, we’re all grown up.

I say, “Do you remember that, Mary?” “Wasn’t it a hoot?”

Mary stares at me blank-eyed. She’s thirty-nine. She wears a blue bathrobe and mismatched slippers—one white, one blue, both the same style. I am thirty-seven and have a daughter of my own, Amanda, who is two and a half.

“Wasn’t that the best feeling?” I say. “Laughing like that about feeding her the Cheez-it’s? We got in so much trouble when Mom and Dad got home.”

Mary leans back in her red chair, the one with the stuffing falling out of the bottom. We brought it here for her two years ago, when she first arrived.

I nod at her, and she nods back, like she knows she’s supposed to do something. She follows me with her eyes. We are sitting in the hospital room where

she lives now, fluorescent lights shining down on her body, casting their pallid glow all over her, this woman who should be so different, so alive.

“Remember that feeling?” I say.

I try to press it into her, my memory. I pick up her hand. I hold it against my ribs and say, “Remember how we laughed.” She stares at me, unseeing, blank. I press her hand harder against my ribs, breathing in and out, and then I laugh. I laugh like we did back then—short, spastic giggles that we tried to hush but could not, those near-maniacal bursts of joy—in and out I breathe and laugh, my voice ringing into this stale air, as if I can resuscitate her with this sound, with my touch, with my own body.

SIGNS I MIGHT HAVE SEEN

The day Mary came to try on her dress, three years ago, we left Mrs. McCrae’s dress shop and went for lunch at the Colonial Store. They sold china dolls in the front section of the store, and postcards for the tourists, and in the back there was a little counter with some stools. They served lunch and breakfast, white coffee mugs hanging along the wall above the percolator. Nothing fancy here— no espresso, no lattes (drinks Mary had grown to love). Just coffee. Tuna fish sandwiches. Burgers. Grilled cheese.

“We’re leaving for Minnesota in October,” I said, “as soon as the wedding’s over. A couple of weeks ago, we found this sweet little house, a cottage, with red shutters and a garden that winds to the driveway. It’s so cute, you’ll love it, Mary.”

“Have you seen it yet?”

“He sent me pictures.”

“You’re moving to a house you’ve never seen?”

“I couldn’t fly out there again. I was just there in July. I trust him.”

Mary shook her head. She said, “I worry, Junie.”

“About what?”

“The life you’re making, with Gerald, I don’t know – it’s so –”

“What, provincial?”

“*Traditional.*”

“I knew you’d say something like that.”

“But you always had these big dreams. You were going to study in Paris, remember? To finish your degree?”

“I got my degree. In education.”

“But you’re going to finish your PhD, right?”

The teenage girl behind the counter, someone we didn’t know, came out front to pour us some more coffee. It had been sitting too long in the pot and was bitter now.

“Have you and Stella been talking about this?” I said. “You’ve both decided.”

“Stella doesn’t talk about this stuff and you know it.”

“This is what I want,” I said. “I want a family.”

“Okay. I just thought you should think about what you’re giving up.”

“I have,” I said. “Not everyone wants to be a vet like you, beautiful Mary, perfect Mary, the one with all the brains and looks and promise.”

She made a little choking sound in her throat, a scoff.

“Give me a break,” she said.

“You know that’s how it’s always been.”

“It has not.”

We both took bites of our sandwiches. Sipped the bitter coffee. Ignored the men walking behind us, heading for the restrooms in the back. Voices we didn't recognize, Boston accents, here for the construction, maybe. They were building an office complex in the field where the fair had always been. *Bolton's Office Center*, the sign out front already read. A long low building with black windows all around. We hated it. Danielle and I used to dream we'd live in the white mansion across the street, and let our horses run free in that field. The mansion was a doctor's office now.

I leaned back on the stool. I sighed.

“I'm pregnant,” I said.

Mary turned and looked at me. Her mouth was full. She chewed. But I could see in her eyes that she wished that I was not, that she wished that I had waited, that this was it, the end of my life – a family too quickly. I was only twenty-seven, said her eyes, this was too much already, women don't do this so fast these days.

She swallowed. Her eyes teared up, and she said, “Congratulations, Junie,” and she leaned forward and hugged me, for the second time that day. Mary was not a hugger. But here she was, holding me close again, as if she wanted to stop me from doing this, as if she could hold me back from the life I was heading into.

That's what I thought then. But now, looking back, I think it was her secrets she was wishing she could tell me. The things she wanted me to know but could not say. The little bag of pills inside her bag. The too-long days of veterinary school, and how tired she was, how tired she was; and even though she was so close to the end, she did not know if she could do it. She was scared, is what she said when she hugged

me. But I misread. I thought it was all judgment. So caught up in my own life – she was right about that part – that I did not see hers.

“This ache in my calf,” she said. “Killing me.”

“Have you been sleeping enough?”

“Sure,” she said. “Yeah. It’s just a cramp. And these headaches.”

“Do you need some aspirin? You’ve had that headache for days now.”

“I have some,” she said.

She reached into her bag. I went to the bathroom. When I came back, she said she’d better go. She drove down the highway, to the spot where the car hit the tree, and her body flew through the air, and Willow Smalls found her, Willow who wore her black eyeliner and drank herself almost to death, who tortured her father Dr. Smalls by running away and disappearing and returning again too thin, strung out. Willow who lied, when they were younger, and hurt Mary in some way I’ll never know. Mary. Mary, gone. Her life ended when her car hit that tree. That tree on 495, that big old oak tree with its fat trunk that my arms can’t reach around, it’s so wide and solid. That tree with its scar from where the car hit. A few miles down the road, that’s where my father’s students died years and years ago. And that tree, just at the bend in the highway, that’s where Mary’s car hit, and then her body flew, ahead, down the highway onto the shoulder, where Willow Smalls found her. Breathing. Alone.

QUARRY

In our wetland town, I have two favorite places—the pond and the quarry. In the middle of the night, sometimes, I wake up thinking of the quarry, and I make a plan to

go there in the morning. It's nothing anyone would call spectacular. Not a viewpoint. Or a lookout. Or a vista. Or a grand sweeping scene. It is small beauty—a little bowl of cliffs made from boulders, some trees I love. Once, when we were young, three boys drove their car up the back of this hill where there's the remains of a road from the quarry days, and they drove right over this cliff. In the middle of the night. Sailing, and then the crash. I remember that Mary cried for a week after, though she said she wasn't friends with those boys.

My father and sisters and I walked here, after his teaching days. He'd tell us about how the wind moves through the trees, at what velocity, and he'd estimate the height of the trees and ask us to guess how long an acorn, or a leaf, would take to fall from this young birch or that old sugar maple, and then he'd calculate it for us. Stella would always run far ahead so she didn't have to take the lesson; sometimes, she'd climb a tree or hide behind a shrub and wait for us to notice her absence. Then she'd jump out at us, hollering, her face wild and open, and we'd act surprised. I would always wander behind our father and Mary, trying to calculate with them but not able to grasp the formulas. Mary was right beside him, or just in front on the narrowest trails, calculating and spotting all the animals, too—flipping logs to discover the damp underworld where salamanders lived, studying the squirrels that scampered up trees and across the old stone walls, pointing to white-tailed deer that held their heads and tails high as they leaped away from us, and once, when we were very lucky, a coyote crossed the trail one hundred yards ahead.

Now, when I look up, the tree tops sway toward each other, and away. Maples, ashes, and beech trees have the tallest trunks and catch the winds. They don't bend all

in unison but as if the wind is blowing five ways at once—criss-crossed, clashing. Maybe it's because they're all different sizes and take the wind at different degrees. My father would have known. *If we estimate that the beech tree's trunk is 4 feet in diameter...* Mary could have solved it. I feel him here, in the woods, and Mary, too. They're always walking ahead of me, talking.

In the winter, the bare branches scratch against each other and the limbs moan and creak, rubbing. In the summer, there's the sound of fluttering leaves and this place looks different, green with ferns and moss and underbrush. The trail is almost covered in some places in the summertime. The moss on the rocks—the glacial rocks and the stone walls—is pale green, fanning out, which means that they've been here for hundreds of year, unmoved. Not many people walk this trail anymore. They go to the pond trails and Wheeler Farm, where there are views. But no matter where you go, Bolton is wetland, streams and marshes and ponds in the forests, and then the hills and rocks, massive boulders left standing in a glacier's wake thousands of years ago. I love their permanence, how they've stood in spite of all our human markers of time. Birthdays, anniversaries, wars, deaths, genocides, our nation's founding. These rocks haven't moved through all of that. They were here when the Native Americans walked the paths that we still walk in the woods, and the paths that became our roads—Narragansett and Wampanoag tribes—and they were moved by the slaves who came with the colonists, and they've seen houses rise, fall, burn, and been reclaimed by these wood, leaving just the stone foundations like the ones we come across at the top of the hill. Who knows what else they've endured.

Gerald teases me. "Going to your old haunt?"

“Yeah,” I say. I lean over to tie my shoe, to pull up my sock, to tighten the sweater around my waist. I don’t look at him.

He pats my hip when he teases—one arm wrapped around my waist. Two taps. Then he pulls me close. He’s warm this morning, and trying. But I’m still upset about his secret with Stella, the New Mexico plan. I don’t want to flirt or cuddle yet. And I don’t understand his vacillations—warm one minute, cool and distant the next. It makes me wary.

Gerald likes to laugh, and it used to come easily to him. Not the past year or two. But usually. Usually he’s a laugher. He sits back on the couch with his hands behind his head, and he asks Amanda a question, something silly like what does the finger she’s always sucking on taste like? And when she says chocolate, he chuckles. He tosses her up in his arms and catches her on her way back down. He doesn’t worry that she’ll fall.

“Relax, Junie,” he says. “Nothing is going to happen.”

Gerald’s dark hair goes flyaway in the summer heat, too curly. He has dark brown eyes. When he concentrates on something, he rubs the back of his neck with one hand until he knows the answer.

This is what he does too often now, a hand against his neck, worrying.

“Is it Nadine?” I said one night in May. “Is that what you think about?”

He’d said nothing to me all night—through pasta and sausage at dinner and putting a puzzle together with Amanda and reading before we turned out the light—and then, finally, in the dark: “I had lunch with Nadine today. She said something fascinating about the end of the potato famine.”

“Something fascinating about the *potato famine*?” Was he kidding?

“It’s what she’s researching.”

I didn’t say anything. The room was dark. My chest was hot with fury. I laid on my side and watched the window by the corner, the silhouetted tree branches shadowing the wall. It’s a cherry tree, planted years and years before we bought the house. There were blooms on the branches; they fluttered in the wind, their shadows trembling.

“Stop,” he said. “Don’t be jealous.”

“I’m not jealous.” I could hear the unintended edge in my voice, and I knew he heard it, too. I didn’t *want* to be jealous. I wanted to feel content and confident in our love, and focused on more interesting things. Like Amanda, or my work, or, hell, saving the town forests and coyotes, like Danielle. But there are so many cracks and distances these days that it fills me with this jangling, ever-present fear. Nadine is always at the office with him, all year and all summer. She’s the only non-religious colleague in the department, and she’s very liberal, like us, Gerald always says. I’ve met her at the department gatherings, and once or twice when Amanda and I met Gerald on campus for lunch.

Hello, Junie! she said, and she smiled wide. *I’ve heard so much about you. It’s wonderful to meet you.*

She was too eager, holding my hand in both her own slender palms, and looking earnestly into my eyes. What’s she trying so hard for? I thought. What’s she covering, or compensating for? The trouble is, she’s beautiful, with long legs, a waif-thin body and a pixie cut. She looks like she walked out of Twiggy’s dressing room.

She wears triangular almost-mini dresses (I don't know how she gets away with them on this conservative campus) and her legs don't have any veins or cellulite. She's single. She's never had children. Do I resent her for that? Maybe I do. I envy her life, and her freedom, and her body that's been unchanged by childbirth and marriage and a sick sister. From here, it looks like she has it easy, even though I know that probably isn't true. She probably has some problems. Maybe her parents were abusive alcoholics. Or she grew up on the streets. Or she has persistent athlete's foot.

I laughed to myself.

"What's funny?" said Gerald.

I imagined her beautiful body sitting on a bedroom chair, her hands slipping off her shoes, and WAH WAH WAH! the music from *Psycho* plays and there are her vile, repulsive feet, the skin flaking off in yellow patches, and she looks down with sadness, knowing no one will love her with those uglies.

"Nothing," I said. But I kept on smiling, lingering on my petty fantasy.

The wind stopped. The shadows were still. Gerald and I have known each other since we were children; I can't hide anything from him.

"I'm not interested in Nadine. She's a *colleague*. We talk work, that's all. She's helping me with my book."

I snapped back into annoyance. "Don't get defensive."

"I'm not being defensive, Junie. Why do you have that tone in your voice whenever Nadine comes up? Why are you so threatened by her?"

There was a long silence, and everything bubbled up into my mind: these years in Bolton, and this growing distance between us. Once we lived in Michigan, in a little

apartment with green walls. We hated the color. We were going to repaint, make it cozier. I hung curtains and bought pots and flowering houseplants. I set them in rows in the window, cheery red and white blooms in the sunshine. Gerald would stay up late working at the desk we set up in the living room, and I'd work in the kitchen, and at midnight we'd take a break for ice cream or sex or to play a record. It was cozy and good. We'd just gotten engaged the winter before, at the quarry, in the snow, and in a month, we'd be married. But then there was Mary's accident, and we came home, the visit lasting longer and longer until it was permanent. I spent a whole winter living with my parents, and then my father died and what else could we do? We stayed. We bought the little colonial.

Michigan is where we're supposed to be. Not here. Not back home again, trapped by circumstance.

And I *am* threatened, which is humiliating and makes me feel weak, like some foolish jealous housewife. I've become everything Mary feared I would, and worse. I hate that I'm jealous, but I can't stop it, either, because he shows *her* his book and not me anymore, and he spends more time with *her* than with me and Amanda, and he *wants* to be there with her, and it feels like he's here with us out of obligation, the way he sighs as he steps in the door and puts down his bag and greets me with weary, wary eyes. *What will happen tonight?* he wonders. I do, too.

I soften my voice. "I know. It's just that you're never here anymore, and I don't know what to think."

"*You're* the one who's gone," he said. "Not me. It isn't me."

He went to the couch that night. He slept in the living room, and even from upstairs, I could hear him snore and grumble.

“Know what?” he said. “I’m going to the couch for the night.”

That struck me hard in the pit of my stomach. He was going to sleep on the couch? He’d never done that before. Neither of us had. We’ve slept with our backs to each other all year, but we were at least in this bed together.

I was so hurt that I snapped, “Good idea! Go! I don’t care.”

He gathered up the comforter and left me with our red-tulip wedding quilt. He snatched a pillow from the bed. His face was wrinkled in anger.

“I will,” he said.

He walked out of the bedroom with the comforter dragging behind him. I sat with my arms crossed on the bed.

I was afraid he’d slam the door and wake up Amanda, but he didn’t. He just walked downstairs.

As soon as he walked down the stairs and I heard him settle into the living room, I missed him. Wanted to say: No, no, please come back. Please come back to me. We don’t need to fight. I know it’s not Nadine. I know you love me. I love you. Come back.

These are the days I go to the little cliff spot, if I don’t go to Mary. Gerald and I were engaged here. In the snow, the winter before I came home. The winter before the accident. We came here all giddy, and he knelt in the snow, and asked me to marry him.

It's in the woods, down a trail you wouldn't see unless you knew it was there—two short stone posts in between the trees—and it leads uphill and down, to an old quarry. Limestone. Filled in now, a pond where the pit remains, and around the pit, the trees are mostly birch, and in the fall—it is its own little splendor in the fall. Orange and yellow and red leaves, all that golden light reflected in the dark water. The birches rise up on all sides but the one I walk in on, so it is like finding a cleared space made just for you, made only for you, made for whatever kind of moment you need.

I've come here on my own since I got my driver's license in high school; I'd bring our dog and we'd walk for an hour or two. Maybe it's only that I think the rocks must know so much by now, and the sound of the wind in the drying leaves is like an old song to me here, flitter-floats across the quarry in that echoing way it has of moving over water in hollowed-out space—something else my father and Mary could explain. It's so quiet, but full of good sound. The leaves. A splash of water when a fish jumps, an animal rustles in the undergrowth, or a bird slips down and then up again. An airplane moving far, far overhead. I try not to think of him, but I can't help it—his shoulder touching mine at the pond. How he walked to Amanda and crouched down to talk to her—the muscles in his forearms, his shirt sleeves rolled up, his bare feet on the sand. All that bare skin, tanned, pulsing, wanting me to touch him. Or maybe just me wanting to touch him. I want to touch him. When I touch him, he won't recoil or give me a sad look. He'll be warm, and reach to hold me, and I'll lean into him.

The day Gerald and I were engaged, it was January, and we walked the path that runs behind the old colonial houses and their yards bound by old always-tumbling-down stone walls—the stand of three houses with the center chimneys, some of the oldest in town—through the woods, uphill, over the streams and past the pond. Past the old round kiln built into the hill, twelve feet of rocks piled like the stone walls, fit perfectly one against the other, seamless, and up the highest hill, to the big quarry, where lyme was mined for years, hauled down to the kiln, and burned to liquid. For plaster. For the walls that stand up the old houses. This quarry is broader than the first, and full of water now, too, thirty feet across. Frozen solid in the winter, with thirty feet of rock rising up—big, solid glacial rocks, pointing to the sky—and frozen streams of water pushing from their cracks down to the pool. He knelt there, at the edge of the quarry, in the snow. The Sawyers’ Boxers barked at us from behind their invisible fence, almost a mile away.

“Yes!” I said, and knelt down in the snow with him. We kissed. We walked back to the car holding hands and had sex in the backseat. We laid there together for awhile, naked, not caring if anyone drove by on 117 and saw us. We were so delighted and full of hope that day.

We never got married, though, because of Mary’s accident.

For awhile, when he moved back, he and I would come here together. But lately we take separate walks—long, solitary, quiet walks.

The morning after Gerald slept on the couch for the first time, he came up before Amanda would find him there. He crawled into bed smelling of sleep. I rolled over. I was awake. I heard him coming.

“Come here,” I said.

I didn’t open my eyes. I only said that and held out my arms, and he came close to me. Touched my face.

We stayed very still until we fell asleep again, as if we could keep the fights at bay by barely moving. As if we could hold onto this good quiet forever if we only touched a little, if we only did not speak.

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SEVERE BRAIN INJURY: THE BASICS: A severe brain injury is one that typically causes an unconscious state or coma, generally lasting no more than a few weeks. When they do not result in death such injuries are catastrophically disabling, and family members often have many questions: about terminology, determining a prognosis, health consequences, and what types of care are available. This booklet aims to help families understand what is happening to their loved ones in the days, weeks, and months following a severe brain injury.

*

THINGS THEY SAY

This is what they say: the aunts and the uncles and my little sister Stella. There was no way to know. And you are not to blame. And you could not have predicted, seen into the future. And who do you think you are, anyway?

They say: Fate. Destiny. Inevitable. They say: Soon, a Better Place.

They say: Forgive, forgive, forgive.

They do not know what I said to her that day. They do not know that she came to Bolton to try on her dress for my wedding, because I guilted her into it. She didn't have time. She was at Tuft's, almost done with her degree, working with a large-animal vet. But I insisted, asked if she didn't care about family anymore, said I never see her. She sighed. Fine, she said.

The doctors have checked, and it is hard to say. She could be either here or there. Caught in this netherworld, my sister, who was always headed for greater things. The whole world at her fingertips, they used to say. That raven hair, that sharp mind, that intellect, that smile. She had all the boys begging.

IN JUNE: THESE SMALL BETRAYALS

I go home and the house is quiet. Just: silent. Simon, Irish Setter mix, runs downstairs and wags his tail, the thwap against the wall. We got him when we bought this house. Danielle talked us into it, driving him over here on the front seat of her truck. He'd wandered onto the Potter land all matted and skinny, she said, and her father couldn't handle a dog with this much energy. Danielle already had two corgis, and one was territorial with new dogs.

"I think it's a sign," she told me. "This is your dog. You need an animal in your life." She was joking, a little. She laughed. "Come on, he'll cheer you up."

I thought about Mary in the hospital, her scarred, disfigured face, and how she'd been planning to adopt three dogs as soon as she closed on the house in Groton.

I thought that three was an arbitrary number, but she said it was so she'd have a pack. Before she switched to large animals in her second year of school, she'd been planning on being a small-animal vet. I always wondered if the dogs were to make up for that, because ever since she applied for vet school, she dreamed of her own small animal hospital, her own staff, her own dogs and cats.

Amanda was in the sling against my chest, sleeping. I was tired. Did I need one more thing to take care of? But this wiggly skinny dog leaned against my legs and lolled up at me, mouth open and smiling. I laughed at him.

"You're a ham," I said. "Okay."

Gerald loves dogs; I knew he'd be thrilled with this one. He named him Simon, after Simon and Garfunkel. We used to listen to their records on our "folk nights" in our apartment in Michigan.

That was a long time ago.

This morning, Gerald drove off to work, beeped twice at the bottom of the driveway, waved one hand out the window. It was six am. Amanda was still asleep. I walked to the end of the driveway in my robe, picked up the paper, and watched the car fade away.

It is June. We should be on vacation, but Gerald wants a promotion, Harry Winnamaker retiring next year. *An opportunity*, Gerald sighs in the night, resigned to it. Dean of Arts and Sciences. Maybe that will help him keep his job in spite of the cuts they say are coming. The rumors are, faculty and staff will be let go. The school is in financial trouble and has been teetering all year. Their salaries were reduced by ten percent. But what being dean means is more meetings, more little chats in the

halls, more administrating, more shmoozy boozy cocktail parties when I'll wear something not too revealing and make sure all goes well, calling out, "Amaaanda!" in a playful voice when I see her at the top of the stairs. She loves parties.

I lean against the door. Gerald doesn't want that job. All he wants is to research and write and teach. He doesn't want to manage the faculty or make administrative decisions. But. This is what he thinks will keep him there.

Simon shoves the screen door open with his nose and races outside, circling the yard, then comes to me with his tail wagging. This dog has so much enthusiasm.

"Hi, Simon," I say.

Any minute, Danielle is coming for Amanda, so that she can play with her daughter Alice until noon while I get a break. We trade off like this. And tomorrow, I'll drop Amanda at Mrs. McCrae's and go work at the orchard. It feels like a betrayal—because when she's at Mrs. McCrae's, I feel free. Even when I'm working at the orchard, exhausted, even then.

I walk back into the house with Simon, into the kitchen, and fill up his food dish. He wags his tail, sits, and waits for me.

"Okay," I say. He races for the dish and starts gobbling it down.

"How about a walk?" I say.

He keeps on eating. I go upstairs and get dressed.

We go into town, and the day seems ordinary. Fine. The sun is shining. It's humid as ever, June melting its way into July. Simon wags his way before me, not even on leash because he always stays close. This is why Gerald loves setters and goldens and labs,

for their loyalty. Such sweet dogs. He turns to look at me now and then, tongue lolling out in a smile.

Mrs. McCrae waves from across the street as I walk past Gen-Rad, that long low building filling up the field that Danielle and I had planned to turn into our stables when we were little. On the right is the white house on the hill, our House of Awe, turrets and all. Wide black shutters. It's been abandoned for years now, and rumors go that the town will buy it, restore it, and turn it into a place for meetings or socials or even a small museum.

Cars swim by on their way in and out of town, and then, the brick buildings in the center come into view, and there's the Candy Kitchen, which has been there since forever, and there is Mervin's Hardware, and Mrs. McCrae's Dress Shop, the only one in town, where my mother bought me a formal dress for the eighth grade dance. It was white with pink roses and little puffed cap sleeves, a wide neck, a low back. Tony gave me a rose corsage, and we slow danced to Stairway to Heaven for three full minutes at the end of the night. The next year, there was Gerald, and that was it. We went back for my wedding dress. Mary came to try on her bridesmaid's dress there. It was that day at Mrs. McCrae's, the last time I saw Mary healthy.

There's the Episcopalian Church, and around the bend, further out of town, the Catholic one. And the firestation and the penny candy store and the drugstore run by Mrs. Haggel, who is practically deaf.

I tie Simon to a meter that's never checked (no one parks too long in town, and if they do, we're grateful for their business) and go into the drugstore for ibuprofen.

Gerald's shoulder is acting up again, his old college baseball injury. Not enough exercise, I sing, a real wife.

A man at the counter is being rung up by Mrs. Haggel, who smiles at him, hands him his change, and nods goodbye.

"Glad to see you again," she says.

"You, too," he says, and his voice sings into me. I catch my breath.

There's something familiar in his stance, something in the way his shoulders slant just slightly to the right, and his neck—a graceful neck—and his hands, taking the change—they send something through me, an echo, a reverberation, a memory from some other time. He's someone I know.

When he turns, I look into his green eyes and we're in some other world where things happen too slowly. He puts one hand into his pocket, lowers his other hand, holding the bag, and he grins, that cocksure grin: and it's Tony, my old childhood friend Tony, returned.

We have lunch, because that's what old friends do. He drives me and Simon back in his mother's rusting 70s Saab. The sunroof is open, and it shines on his forearms. They're muscled and strong; I see the muscles twitch and shift as he turns the wheel with those beautiful hands. The wind blows his hair up. He has dark hair and olive skin, a straight nose, and full lips. In high school, he had plenty of girlfriends. By then, we weren't really friends.

We have tuna sandwiches in my backyard. We sit at the picnic table under the old oak tree, facing each other, and laughing. In elementary school, we neighbors, and

inseparable. In middle school, he was my first kiss, and then we became enemies. His family moved across town, to one of the new big houses coming up around town. In high school, we'd disappeared from each other—shadows of the past between us when we crossed paths in the halls. And now, it is as if he has risen up from the lake just when I needed him. He's a respite.

“A daughter?” he says. “Little Junie has a daughter?”

He laughs, a long, rich laugh, head thrown back. His hands rest on the arms of the chair. He has long fingers and rough palms, a hobby hands-man. He still has those same sharp cheekbones, one dimple. The same roundness growing inside me—a hiccup waiting.

“You're not married?” I say.

“Eh,” he leans back in his chair and looks up at the branches and leaves, blue sky.

“Eh?”

Simon pants beside us and wanders deeper into the shade of the oak tree, grunts as he lies down.

“I was,” he says. He keeps looking up. The sun shines on him in stars and splashes through the oak leaves. He squints. “I'm divorced. We were together six years.”

“Oh,” I say. “I'm sorry.”

I stare down at my feet on the slate tiles, wishing for them to get tan. They're glaring white. Tony is divorced. Tony is sitting here beside me, and I'm pulled towards him. I haven't felt anything like this in—not in years, since Gerald and I got

engaged, before Mary's accident. There's that fluttering in me, an excitement, which feels like joy. Is it joy? Or am I just flirting with an old friend? An attractive friend. I make myself admit my attraction to him. I look up at Tony again. Yes. Attraction.

He shrugs and shakes his head, then looks back at me.

"I'm here for another month," he says. "We're having these meetings in Boston until the end of July, to renegotiate the contracts, and I'm helping my mom pack to move to Denver."

He stares into my eyes, sun touching his hair in slivers, touching on pieces of gray.

"Denver?"

"Her sister. They're going to share a house, and a nurse, right near my cousin Beth's place, so she'll keep an eye on them. It's just the same with me and Rob so spread out; we can go visit Denver as easy as Massachusetts."

"Strange how our mothers are aging," I say. I almost say *and both widowed*, but Tony's father left years ago, for a younger woman. It was sudden. It was his nurse. It was such a cliché, and for years, his mother wouldn't walk through town because she was mortified. All the other mothers brought her meals and visited her in the afternoons, bemoaning their childrens' departure for college, or their weedy gardens, or their disobedient dogs—but never complaining about their own husbands, who suddenly took on a brightness, a sort of goodness-glow: still here, at least, and still in love with me, as I love him, they each thought.

As if he hasn't heard me, he says, "It's good to see you." His tone is surprised.

“You, too,” I say, and my tone, unintentionally, is surprised, too, nearly mimicking his. I’m staring at him too long. I force my gaze to Simon, who lolls on the patio beside me. Our patio, me and Gerald’s.

Tony touches my hand with his and we’re eight and at the nun’s house in the wintertime, sneaking down the road we are not supposed to travel, and I am scared. Of the big dog at the Minor’s house. Of the nuns. Of crazy Leonard and Shane with their shotguns. We peek into the nun’s windows; it’s dusk, just before 4 o’clock, and the lights inside are yellow and cozy. The nuns are getting dinner ready, putting food onto the big dining room table with its chandelier. My legs are cold in the snow, my feet growing numb. We hear a shot in the woods behind us. A rabbit dies, long high wail. We run down the driveway, and one of the nuns opens the door and screams, “Shane! Leonard! Get the hell off our property!” That night, my parents tell me and Mary that we’ll have a baby sister, and I run away, back into the snow. My parents come searching with a flashlight—that little white light my salvation.

He’s staring at me, and we’re at the pond in the summertime, and he kisses me, my first kiss. I feel it through my whole body. It’s nighttime and we’ve snuck out, as we’d come to do every night that summer, making out in the underbrush and on the beach.

Mary taught me to swim that pond without being afraid.

She knew I was sneaking out, and covered for me. Sometimes, pretending she was babysitting for me, she came along and swam with us, too cool for our younger games but too bored to resist.

Her friends were wilder—Willow for awhile, and then the older kids, who drank and smoked pot and drove from empty house to empty house for weekend parties. But she was such a good girl, everyone in town believed. No one suspected.

Tony knows all of this, but he's not tainted by any of the new things—Mary's accident, my father's death, Stella's running away, my failing marriage, all the financial stress.

I let his hand rest on mine. I stare back at him. My heart is thudding, racing—the yard swirls around us, a green blur—and all I see is Tony and his green eyes looking back at me.

This is nothing. This is nothing. This is nothing. I sing it to myself like a song I should remember.

“Let's have lunch tomorrow,” he says. I snap awake. Pull my hand away.

I look back down at my feet. Tomorrow? Can I do this? My body is charged.

“Good,” I say, without looking up. “Lunch is good.”

He laughs, and I look up.

“Lunch *is* good,” he says, mocking me. I laugh, too. I'm being silly. This is just us, old friends.

He gets up to leave and heads for the side yard.

“See you tomorrow,” he says. He hops over the stone wall, turning back to wave. I wave back and he laughs, takes a skipping step, and then disappears around the corner of the house. I hear the gate swing shut. Simon trots over, puts one paw on my knee, whines, and stares at me hard.

“Oh.” I laugh. “Are you hungry again?”

When I stand up, my legs are shaky. I laugh again, letting something loose, and take Simon into the kitchen. I pour more kibble into his bowl. The phone rings but I don't pick up. Stella's voice comes on the answering machine.

"Junie," she says, I'm coming for a visit. I'll be there in a month, just bought my ticket, August 1. She says other things, too, but I stop listening. I stand there. Lean against the counter, hand on one hip, half-lost in a dream. Of lunch tomorrow. Of a childhood at the pond, with Tony. Of laughter across the still black water. Of that one day in the woods, up on Powder Hill, the trees swaying above us.

CHAPTER 2

IMPALED

IV.

IMPALED

Whisper this to me in the night. Put your palms against mine. Clap with me. *Criss-cross, apple sauce, do me a favor and get lost.* Collapse into giggles. Endless fits that attack like convulsions. Take over the body. Lose control. Mary with your raven black hair down your back, your eyes two blue globes staring into me. You are my sister gone.

Jump rope, feet stepping quickly over the snap of it. Sing a song about kissing boys in trees. *Behind the frigerator, there is a piece of glass, Miss Mary sat upon it and broke her big fat – Ask me no more questions, I'll tell you no more lies, the boys are in the bathroom zipping up their – Flies are in the meadow, the bees are in the yard...* This is us. Red and green striped skirts swaying around our skinny legs. Double Dutch. And if we didn't make it over every rope to the end of the song, we were disappointed. We had to switch with one of the rope-swingers. We had to sit back and watch.

The glass in your cheek was the hardest to see. *Impale*. The very word is invasive. We each felt that glass piercing skin. Gerald came from Michigan, left our little apartment and flew back to Bolton, walked through the hospital doors—shoosh of sound—and then I was lost in him.

Boys brought you tulips on dates, would stand in the doorway shuffling their feet over the slate, sound of scraping in our ears. Stella hiding behind Dad. Mom in the kitchen cooking up a meal.

Your hair is short now, easier to keep up says Amelia, our favorite nurse. Sunday school with Amelia, you remember? She used to laugh with us at the back tables when I was nine, and then we got separated, and she went to private school the next year so we never saw her. She wears her blonde hair pulled back. She gives you massages, touches every part of your body with her hands. Keeps you from getting sores.

Intimacy. The touch. I wonder if you feel it.

Why did I insist you come that day? Why didn't I just let it drop?

They said your body flew fifty feet through the air, at least. Willow Smalls saw it. Saw you on the ground fifty feet beyond the big tree. Saw you bleeding. Willow Smalls, of all people. She knows more of this than I do. She knows if your eyes were open or closed right then. She knows the position of your body on the ground. You might have

tried to say something to her. You might have sensed her presence. You always did remember everyone.

What was it that made you crash into the tree? Did you swerve, and lose control? Were you distracted? And when we were having lunch just before you left—tuna sandwiches at the Colonial Store—is that when you were getting high? What I should have seen and stopped. What we should have known. What we all ignored, not just that day but for years. A secret but not a secret.

Your fingers long, reaching out to touch piano keys, and playing. You could play everything Stella and I could not: Beethoven, Chopin, all of the operas, and the classic old songs Mom loved: *Play It's the Last Dance*, she'd say, and you could pick the tune up even if you didn't know the song by heart. You could play anything by ear; Mom always said so.

I miss your hands on mine and our secrets whispered in the darkness, in the moments when we were supposed to be silent. Illicit laughter. There is nothing better. All of our lives wrapped up in one another from birth. Stella is so far away now, California. There are phone calls. There are visits. It is not the same. I would have moved away, too, stayed on in Michigan with Gerald if this hadn't happened. Both of us getting our PhD's, and now—now I am a high school teacher, a worker-in-my-best-friend's-orchard, a mother, a wife. In Bolton, Massachusetts, where I have always been. A weekend back home has become a lifetime.

I believe you can hear everything. I believe you know it all. Otherwise, all of this is a waste, isn't

it. You are still there, somewhere deep inside your own body, listening intently. You are taking it all in. Someday, you'll talk back – sit right up, level your eyes and say:

Junie, what's all this fuss? Here I am.

*

ONE NIGHT, YEARS AGO

When you hold a secret, and it scares you so hard that you can't undo the picture of it, the memory, the fear it's driven into you, then you think—if I can just keep going long enough, maybe I can disprove the secret, become something other than what the secret says I might become. But there it always is, flash of memory, a knotted anchor in the gut, around which everything else grows, roots winding, blood pulsing through the knots.

That's what Mary told me one night the year before the accident. She was drunk. We were at The Squire in Grafton; I'd met her after her work at Tufts Veterinary School. She was becoming a large-animal vet, just months away from graduating and going to work for a vet in Concord—fancy town, show horses: bigtime.

“What's your secret?” I asked. “What have you been holding onto for so long?”

I'd only had a beer. I'd be the driver, as always with Mary. Around us, people talked and played darts and hollered for their friends to buy them another—*anothah*. The Tavern was a dive bar, with peanut shells spread on the floor. I hated the crunch of walking there.

“You're so literal, Junie,” she said. She looked sideways at me, blue eyes slit. She laughed. “I'm not talking about *me*. I'm just telling you some shit I know.”

I smirked and took a sip of Coke—free, from the bartender. Sodas are almost always free when you're with drinkers; they encourage your sobriety so you can haul the drinkers out at closing time and get home safe.

“Thanks, Mary, but I don't buy that. Where'd you learn it?”

“Maybe Alan Ball is here tonight,” she said, and twirled around in her seat. She glanced over to the other side of the bar, where three men in polo shirts—too preppy for this place—were playing darts. “Uch, those blowhards,” she said. Her mouth got dirty when she was drunk. Her myriad of fans in Bolton, our hometown twenty minutes away, would never believe this version of Mary. Perfect, beautiful Mary with the dark hair and the pretty smile and all those smarts, all that potential. Our father's favorite. Stella and I would never match up—me the middle, Stella the youngest. Mary was the firstborn and the closest to our father's wish for a boy.

I touched her arm. “Mary? Please? Look at me. Be serious for one second, okay?”

She turned to me, and made a mock serious face, lowered her voice: “Serious. That's me.”

I ignored the tone.

“What’s the secret? Please? I won’t tell anyone, I swear. It’ll make you feel better to tell me.”

“That’s just self-help talk, June. No one feels better when they unload their darkness on someone else. They feel vulnerable and exposed, and it’s the end of everything—the end of a life that at least *looks* normal. Once it’s out there, everything will change.”

Her eyes welled up. Mary never cried. I put my hand on her shoulder.

She turned away from me, sudden, swiped her beer from the bar, and jumped down from the stool.

“Mary!” I said. “Wait, come on!”

She ignored me. Walked over to the three men playing darts. Crossed her arms, shifted her weight to one hip, and challenged them to a game. They looked at her as men always looked at Mary—delighted that she’d bestowed her glance upon them. She laughed, loud, and shrugged one shoulder. Every time. I gave up. Jumped off my stool, too, and went outside to sit with the smokers until she was ready to go. It was May. All the stars were out. Danielle had me over to the orchard earlier that day to show me the perfect apple tree flowers, coming at the perfect moment—this would be a good harvest, she said, if it didn’t get too hot or too cold, or rain too much, and if we didn’t get any hurricanes. The apple trees were all white blooms.

Outside, a cluster of three smoked, the cloud drifting over me, a toxic bloom of its own. I don’t know why I left Mary there. Why, as I sat outside, I decided that I wouldn’t wait around all night for her this time. Not *this* time. Why, when she was almost-confessing to me, I’d walk away. Gerald called from Michigan. We chatted for

awhile, about his progress researching for the day. The images on the clay pot, the patterns he was sure matched another he'd studied two years earlier, his application for that job in Minneapolis. He'd say *Minnesota* and my heart caught, but I never told him I wasn't sure I wanted to go, uncertain that we should settle in the Midwest, for good. It would be an adventure, he said again, and I agreed. We hung up. I went inside to tell Mary I wanted to leave, and she was in the corner making out with one of the darts men. He wore a yellow polo shirt that was coming up out of his waistband, revealing a soft, hairy belly. They leaned back on a bench, heads banging against the wall as they turned to kiss. I wanted to yank her out of this.

"Mary," I said. I reached between them, cringing. I didn't want to be here right now, breaking up my sister and her friend-of-the-night. "We need to go now, Mare. Will you come with me?"

She looked up. He looked at me, a baby face, round and sweet. Big brown eyes, and a receding hairline. He was going to get hurt.

"We're gonna stick around, June, you can go."

She smiled, then turned back to him, and they kissed again, sloppy, and fast, as if she was trying to prove to me that this was fun, and what she wanted, and I couldn't make her go.

"I'm only home for one more day before I fly back to Michigan. Please?"

She raised one hand and made a sweeping motion: *Go. Go home*. I got annoyed. She hadn't done this in a long time, but it was part of her routine, now and then. Find a man. *Go home, Junie, see you tomorrow. Forget about our plans. This is my plan.*

Fine.

So I left. I walked back into the early May night, through the smoker haze by the door, to my parents' car, which I borrowed whenever I was home, and I drove back to their house in Bolton. I didn't have the keys to her apartment. I was supposed to stay with her for the night, a sleepover like old times. Instead, I wound southwest, through the woods, dark roads, avoiding the highway. When a deer jumped in front of the car, I stopped short, brakes squealing. My breath stopped. It hopped in front of the car, and over a stone wall to my left, into the woods, white tail raised high.

My windows were open, and I heard it leap to safety, far away from here, and the frogs in some nearby swamp were croaking—a spring sound I've always loved—and I waited to hear an owl, my heart still pumping. I sat there for a long time, I don't know how long, wondering what we would do about Mary—should Stella come out so we could have an intervention? Our parents would never talk about it, but maybe Stella would do it. We could try. We kept saying we would, and then she'd say there was too much to do in New Mexico these days, making pots, with her partner Merle, and Mary would be better, anyway, she seemed fine the next time one of us visited—she was improving, after all. Nothing to worry about, probably, we said to each other.

I thought about our last time home all together, in the fall, for our mother's sixtieth. Dad threw her a party at the house, and we all sat in the yard together barefoot. Later, we walked into the woods, to the old treehouse, and climbed the ladder—only four feet off the ground, though I remembered it as being at the top of the tree—and told stories about our lives.

A car came towards me, in the darkness, headlights rounding a curve, its rumble drowning out the frogs and the wind. When the headlights crossed my windshield, I was blinded for a moment: caught. Then the lights spun past me as the car straightened. I shook myself out of remembering, and pressed the gas, starting forward again, back towards my parents' house. I had no idea that the following year, Gerald and I would be living at their house, in Bolton indefinitely to help with Mary, after the accident. That I would be pregnant. That our whole lives would change, pivoting around the problem that none of us could acknowledge and face down: Mary's secrets, her addiction, our family's cracks and dark hollows. In the following few years, it would all come crashing into the light, caught, and then upsun into the now of our lives. A tumble of golden thread that weaves itself in, like a fairytale curse.

NOW: ANATOMY OF A TYPICAL LONG BONE

There's a picture, I say. Do you remember this? I hold it in front of Mary. This book has been here for so long now, I could become a vet if I'd been memorizing as I read. She spent her days with the manual, with its tearing red cover and the gold-embossed words. This was her future—all of these words and diagnoses and cures, paths through illness and dysfunction and irregularities of form and body. I read this to her now because it will help her come back. She'll remember how many hours and days and months and years she put in, and come back. She'll find a path within herself, and re-emerge.

Articular cartilage, trabecular bone, epiphyseal plate, trabecular bone, periosteum, endosteum, compact bone of shaft, medullary cavity. Epiphysis, metaphysis, Diaphysis.

The bone is long with a bulbed end. Around the end is cartilage.

I think of the plates in Mary's bones. The screws. The pins. The thirty-two broken bones she had after the accident three years ago, all mended now, all patched up. Will she be able to walk? They don't know. The back specialist, the neurologist, the spine man—they are not sure. There was damage between C5, C6, C7, bones crushed—those little delicate vertebrae with their branching wings, compressed and broken and fragmented.

They had to fuse half her spine. There's been nerve damage, but they won't know where until she wakes up. They won't be able to say if, and then—no. *Until—*

“Until she wakes up,” I say, where they leave off.

They do not look at me.

“Then there is a picture,” I say, “of the *histiological section of the proximal region of a tibia from a kitten*. So you can see the bone growing. The way the little squares elongate further and further up the bone. How about that.”

I close the book. It's heavy. The corners are so worn they're brown, the back cover almost falling off. *The Merck Veterinary Manual*, her bible for the last five years. She'd carry it back and forth to school, out to Tufts in Grafton, and throw it into the back of her truck on her way to visit the animals, driving miles out into Harvard and Carlisle and Marlborough to see the horses and cows. I went with her a few times, and followed her along as she talked to the owners, and told the horses, *shhh*, and

there, good, as she ran her hands down their legs or pressed into their bellies or pulled up their lips to see their gums.

“Well, Mary.”

I touch her knee and smile at her, and wait to see if she’ll do anything back. She stares straight ahead. Not even tracking me with her eyes today. There’s a scar that runs diagonally across her face now, disfiguring her nose. Her nose is crushed in the middle where the scar cuts through. And there are smaller scars scattered across her face—divots and pocks and raised stripes of skin. The skin on her neck is the same, and pulls to one side—the right side—because it healed it funny when they stitched it up. They did that one fast, because she was bleeding so much. Residents and even interns were helping with all the cuts and tests, just trying to stabilize her that night. My mother said that when she was better, we’d get her plastic surgery to fix it all.

When Mary and Stella and I were small, we played Miss Mary Mack, clapping hands, and I loved the touch of her palms on mine, my older sister Mary, the one with all the promise and beauty and smarts. She would make it, everyone in town would say. She had thick, black hair and fair skin. Blue eyes. Sharp blue eyes that watched everything. You couldn’t fool Mary.

I shake her knee. Lean down and look into her eyes.

“Mary,” I say. I squeeze her knee harder. Can she even feel it? We don’t know. Probably not. Paralyzed, they say, but we can’t say for sure if, until—

The dash by which we live. Ellipses of our lives. The day that Willow Smalls found her on the side of Route 495, there was glass in Mary’s face—and that was the

hardest to see, those big shards, sticking out, waiting to be rescued from your flesh.
The stitches, the surgeries, the seizures you had in the emergency room.

Willow found her by the great old tree that her car hit, a three hundred year old tree that's under the protection of the conservation agency. I hate that tree.

"MARY!" I shout. I look hard at her, take her chin and turn her face toward me, stand on my toes so her eyes land on my face.

But, nothing.

The wind blows up the leaves on the big tree outside the window, and behind the big tree, acres of woods. White underside flutter. I watch the leaves. At the top of the hill, there's a house whose rooftop I can see in the summertime. In the winter, when the trees are bare, I can see it whole. It's a yellow colonial with a driveway that winds miles up through the woods. At five o'clock most winter nights, a car drives up the driveway, headlights glowing. I'd watch it until it reached home, and the headlights went out. A few minutes later, the house lights would come on. Blink. Blink. Blink. Comfort. Now, though, I can't see anything, the woods are so thick.

When I turn back to Mary, she's still staring up at the ceiling.

I drop her chin. I let go of her knee. She can't help it. She's trying. I know that she's trying.

"I'm sorry."

I kiss her cheek, and walk away, down the hall, where Dr. Smalls waits. This is the meeting we set up the other day, another check-in, I assume, when Dr. Smalls will try to temper my expectations. They don't understand that we can't stop believing that

she'll come back. Gerald's supposed to be here with me, but he hasn't shown up. He's working late again, he'll say, finishing the book. *The book.*

"Come in," says Dr. Smalls. "Gerald called and said he couldn't make it."

"Of course."

I don't want to be here. I sense something off.

He says, "I just want to check in." He gestures to the chair across from his desk and takes off his glasses.

"Are you and Gerald doing okay?"

I nod.

"We can always talk about—"

"We're fine."

I fold my hands, stare right into Dr. Smalls' eyes until I feel myself blush, then look down at my fingers interlaced. I press them into each other so the skin turns white. I hear Dr. Smalls sigh and the click of his glasses on the desk. Does everyone in town know that Gerald and I are *not* fine?

"I've known you your whole life, Junie, and I'm going to be honest with you."

My heart skips. Dr. Smalls doesn't talk like this. He eases into things, he's gentle.

"It's time we move Mary to a nursing home."

I stare at him.

"I know, you don't want to hear this." He sighs, rubs his eyes, pinching the skin at the top of his nose. "But I've talked with Gerald, and you're at the end of your financial rope. If you keep her here, you'll sink yourselves into too much debt."

“We can afford—”

He raises his hand. “Let me finish.” His voice is steady, firm.

I sink back into the chair and press my hands tighter, trying not to feel the pins and needles that come. I sit up straight and concentrate on the small of my back, which has been sore lately from lifting boxes at the orchard.

“If you keep her here, you’ll threaten Amanda’s future, and you and Gerald will work your whole lives to get out of this. You’re already going to have to do that. And your mother, on her own now, she needs every penny she gets from those checks. And, Junie? June, sweetheart, look at me.”

I’ve been counting the lines that my curled hands make, studying the feel of my straight back and pinpointing the place it hurts—when I shift this way a hair, is it more, or less?—trying not to hear.

His eyes are watery, green, having seen us through all of this. And his own daughter, Willow, who ran away when we were in high school, Willow who was friends with me, and then Mary when she was in high school—and we turned our heads, all of us, to what was happening.

“I can’t keep her here any longer, *medically*.”

He pauses. Leans forward over his desk.

“Do you know what I mean?”

I do know, but I can’t speak it. Dr. Smalls made an exception, he said last year, when filling out the forms. He said he was doing it for the next few weeks, until we could figure out the next step. He talked to me and Gerald and my mother. He even called Stella, to “keep her in the loop.” As if Stella wants to be in the loop.

“It’s time she moved. She’s not making enough progress to justify her staying here. I’ve already fibbed on the charts and forms to the insurance company. And other people are waiting to come in, people who need this. She’s in a permanent vegetative state.”

People who need the rehabilitation and the services that come with this place—the massages and physical therapy that keep muscles healthy and ready for exercise, the speech therapist, the neurologists and orthopaedic surgeons and occupational therapists and the exercises for the mind. Remember this red square? Turn over the card. Where is the red square?

Dr. Smalls told us that Mary is not in the same category as everyone else here. He said that she wasn’t making enough progress to justify keeping her here. He recommended a nursing home. Palliative care. Keep her comfortable. He tried to take away our hope.

I unwind my fingers and let my back fall. I lean forward in the chair, and let him see my face. I mean it, I’m showing him. I’m not backing down. I’ll convince him.

“*She* needs it,” I say, and I see his cheeks go slack. “She’s in a minimally conscious state. That’s what all her forms say.”

Minimally conscious means she responds to stimuli—eye flickers, tracking our movements, registering sounds and making even guttural response, the oh’s and ah’s I wait for—and she is coming back. Permanent vegetative? No. That means there isn’t any hope.

“That’s what *I* wrote on the forms. We talked about this. I risked my reputation, Junie, because I love your family. You know I almost lost a daughter, long time ago. I know how you’re feeling. I sympathize. But I can’t do it anymore. If anyone found out, I’d be in trouble with the board—”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I have to go.”

There’s a whirl of sound in my mind: fury—why did this happen, where is Gerald, where is everyone else?—and I stand up fast, and turn on his sympathetic face, and walk away, down the hall, past Ms. Chardell in her wheelchair and Amelia our favorite nurse, out the door, into the new-summer heat.

There’s my car in the lot, and behind the lot, the wide expanse of grass that leads to woods—those acres of trees. Hills that rise and arch into each other. I stand there and watch the trees move in the wind. The sky is gray and rain is coming. I’m breathing hard. I put my hands on my hips and look out. Where is the little car that comes back to the house each night? Who is it who lives there, and what is he or she doing now? It’s a man, I decide, and I picture him at work, in a cubicle, typing numbers into an Excel sheet.

Dr. Smalls doesn’t know what he’s talking about. He’s been good to us—so good to us—but he’s old. He doesn’t know the newest things. We need another specialist. And he doesn’t see Mary all the time! She was tracking me yesterday, and she made some strange sounds the day before; it’s all in the notebook I keep by her desk. He hasn’t looked at it. I should show it to him again. I’ll bring it to him tomorrow, so he’ll see that he’s wrong.

I look up the big forested hill and think of that man. He swivels in his office chair, and his phone with conference call capabilities rings, and he answers. It's his girlfriend. They just started dating. He smiles. He's in his late fifties, a widower, and glad to have found company. They say that widowers will get remarried very quickly, sometimes even within months, but a widow might stay single for the rest of her life. Will my mother remarry?

A car pulls into the lot. It's someone I don't know. I remember where I am—at the rehab center, losing this fight for Mary. I walk to my car and feel my back twinge, the first few steps. I have to win. I have to fight harder.

*

WHIP GRAFT

We're past the season of whip grafting, attaching to the tree trunks branches of other varieties, so that they'll grow what we need. Now, we're in the season of the bud graft—take off the leaf bud of a sturdy tree, and attach another variety of apple branch to it. The following year, that branch will bear its own fruit. You can grow all kinds of apples from a single trunk, making the trees magicians. A Macintosh trunk bearing Golden Delicious, Granny Smith, Ida Reds, and Baldwins. A trick of husbandry. Stella calls them patchwork trees. In the fall, we dig up the roots and store them, and in the wintertime, we graft. Come spring, we plant: April and May, and the new sprouts grow with the older roots. And we'll get the Golden Delicious or the Granny Smith or the Macintosh, whichever we'd planned on. The trees come from two different seeds, so if we did not graft on what we wanted, we'd never know what would sprout—a

Granny Smith when we need Red Delicious. Danielle does all the grafting with Miguel in the winter, and all the workers help with t-grafting—bud grafting—come June, starting last week when they arrived. Danielle’s father, who still lives in the old house at the back of the property, taught her, and his father taught him, and now, Danielle holds it like a prize. Sometimes, some years, when we are planting a lot, there are hundreds of trees to graft, and that’s what she does, all winter—goes to town board meetings, works to put all of our land in trust, develops the CSA and recipes for the restaurant and the tasting room in the vineyard, and grafts the new trees.

Danielle’s hands are strong and calloused from years of working on the orchard. Terence boasts that she can beat him in arm-wrestling matches—and it’s true, she can. They do it sometimes at the bar, or at the end of the day over beers. Just to show everyone.

“I was going to cut down that rhododendron that hasn’t bloomed for twenty years,” she says. It’s the bush in front of her father’s house, and shades his front windows. The house is deep brown, an old colonial with low ceilings and small windows. When Mr. McCally was younger, he had to hunch to walk through the house, but now that’s he’s shrinking, he fits.

“So I was clearing all the shrubs around it so that I could pull the rhodie out next week, and look what happened!”

She walks me back to the house.

“The goddamned thing bloomed!”

She laughs her big laugh. “Must’ve heard me say I was going to cut it down!”

I laugh, too, mostly because Danielle is so worked up. It's beautiful, with big, purple flowers all over.

"It looks amazing," I say.

"Yeah, well, Dad doesn't want me to cut it down, anyway, because he likes his privacy. Privacy from *what* I do not know."

She gestures around the house—the little dirt road, the woods on one side, the fields where they grow vegetables for the farmstand on the other. It's ten o'clock and the sun is breaking through the clouds, warming the air.

She laughs again. "Jesus. When I get old, just shoot me."

We walk back down to the barn.

"Amelia stopped by the other day and said you've been in to see Mary every day, like clockwork."

"Yup."

I know what's coming.

"Didn't we just talk about cutting back a little, taking some time for yourself this summer?"

"Danielle."

"I'm not nagging, Junie. I'm *helping*."

Romero and Omar drive past us in the pick-up, big buckets of fertilizer in the back. They're heading to the apple trees, where they'll work all morning. The rest of the crew is in the peach orchard, doing pest control.

"Eh, Junie!" Omar sticks out his head as Remario steers past us, veering a little off the dirt road. "You bringing Amanda over to say hello today?"

I force a smile. “Maybe tomorrow!”

When I greeted them at the orchard in early June, they were tired from the long plane ride, but still caught up with me and Danielle, asked to see pictures of our kids, showed us pictures of theirs. Omar’s daughter is sixteen now, and thinking about which colleges she’ll apply to, and his son is twelve and playing soccer. Romero has three girls, thirteen, fifteen, sixteen. He rolls his eyes and rubs his forehead, “They keep me on my toes,” he said. They wanted to see pictures of Amanda, so I brought out my phone and they scrolled through and laughed.

“Little June with her own girl,” says Omar. “Can’t believe it.”

I’ve known them since I was ten, when they started coming here in their early twenties and Danielle’s father was in charge.

They wave and drive off, and I turn back to Danielle.

“You and Stella love to ‘help,’” I say, making quotes with my fingers when I say *help*. “We need the money. I *can’t* cut back.”

I don’t say—and if I don’t earn enough, we’ll have to move Mary, that I’m working this hard for her. To keep her hope. If we keep on paying, Dr. Smalls won’t move her. He isn’t insisting yet. He’s still saying to talk about it—just talk, not moving—with Gerald, and my mother, and Stella.

“She’ll be here in a few weeks?” Danielle stoops to tie her work boot.

“Yeah. But still no Merle. She’s afraid to introduce us.”

Danielle laughs and looks up. “I’d be afraid to introduce her to you, too.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re a little protective.”

She grunts as she stands. Dusts off her jeans.

“She’s my sister.”

“I know.” She shrugs.

“I’d be *nice* to her!”

I cross my arms, annoyed, and we head for the wine gazebo, to sort the boxes that came in last week.

Her voice falls a pitch. “I know, I know. But you’d give her the third degree, too.”

We walk down the dirt road that runs between the orchard, up the hill to our right, and the sales barn to our left, which stands by the road with its big doors open all summer, inviting in the tourists. Behind us is Mr. McNally’s house, Danielle’s father. They’ve always lived there. Her mother died when we were in college, and he finally turned the orchard over to Danielle a few years ago. Now, she has plans for a restaurant, bigger vineyards, and a CSA.

“She said she sold three quilts last month,” Danielle says. “She emailed last week.”

“She’s doing well,” I say. And I don’t want to talk about Stella anymore, don’t want to think about her life progressing out in New Mexico, while mine is stalled here. “When do you need me to start making pies?”

“Two weeks. What about what Dr. Smalls said? What will you do?”

The wind blows. It’s still cool in the mornings, not yet humid-summer. There’s a strip of grass down the center of the road, still covered in dew. I can hear people talking up ahead but can’t see them yet, around the corner of the barn.

“Gerald talked to you.”

I don’t look up.

“He and Terence had beers last night.”

She smiles, like it should be no surprise. Of course she knows. She knows everything.

“I didn’t know.”

“June.” Her tone is conciliatory, her it’ll-be-okay tone, her c’mon, lighten-up and laugh today tone.

“I got a call, the other day,” I say.

“Mm?”

We come around the bend to the big barn, and there’s Jeannie, waving Danielle down. She’s been asking about working at the orchard for the summer, but Danielle’s been putting her off. She wants to help cater the big events, which all the new people attend. She wants to learn to cook like Danielle, and she says her pies as good—*if not better*—than mine. When I drove home the other day, her husband Ed was in the backyard, shooting at a big red and white target. He hunts deer come fall. *Boom, boom, boom*. Well. At least he was shooting in daylight, I thought, though I still don’t like the idea of a gun so close to our house. A gun in the hands of a man who is often drunk. Last year, he’d shoot at night, on his benders, and Phil’s son Michael, our newest local policeman, would come over when we complained, and get Ed back inside.

“What kind of call?” she says.

I think of telling Danielle about the house. I wonder if there's anything in the barn that I could clear out and sell, with a small commission—she mentioned that once. Maybe now's the time. I could ask. But we're almost within earshot of Jeannie: my neighbor, town gossip.

"Nevermind, I'll tell you later." Danielle looks at me, quizzical, then looks away and hollers hello to Jeannie and raises her arm in a wave, though she's just a few footsteps away.

HIM

At the farthest end of the grocery store aisle, freezer section, all those rows of cold. On the other side of the pond, walking Simon at dusk. Sitting with Gerald and Amanda at the Country Store, a little table for three, I look out the window—a green car pulls up, the leap inside, the leap and jolt. It is Tony walking down One-seventeen when I drive past with Amanda, to play group, it is him stretching at the edge of the soccer field, in running shorts. It is him walking with Millie Trust, and motioning with his hands – yes, this time, really him. Is it? Drive past, turn around, the honk of a car coming at me. Flail of the heart, flail of the hands.

"*Momma*," says Amanda.

"It's okay," I say.

Her face in the rearview mirror. What am I doing? What the hell am I doing?

But I remember: His hands, in tenth grade, on my waist, his lips on my mouth, his hands on my back, under my shirt and across my nipples, the slightest pinch of one and I suck in air. This is pleasure. Along Main Street, that afternoon, we ran into each

other, and walked up the hill into the woods, to the Powder Hill house, where the town stored all its ammunition in the seventeen hundreds. We talked about our past, how we were best friends in elementary school, laughing about how I couldn't skip in gym class and the kids made fun of me, and I said, "But you stood up for me." And then we were kissing, my arms around him. His fingers sliding down my stomach, past my waistband, into my underpants, touching me. And the breath from my body, staring into his eyes while he touched me. Faster, faster. And how I looked up at the trees, their tops swirling overhead, crying out, for the first time, with Tony. The trees kept swirling, and I was rising, rising, up into their leaves.

Stop. Stop. Watch the road. Hold the wheel. Stop thinking about this. Remember how, the next morning, we only smiled sly at each other in school, and he never reached out again, never talked to me, never said, "Let's hang out." How two days later, he walked through the halls with his arm around Willow Smalls, and when I saw him, he pulled his arm away but didn't stay to talk with me.

Block him out, close him off—here: he is a white square of paper in your mind. Crinkle him up. Hold him on your palm. Now: Blow him away. Do it. Away. It tumbles off, fades into a tiny dot of white, dissipates in the air.

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THEFTS INCREASE. POLICE BLAME LOCAL TEENS. Officer Michael Barrone cites three recent thefts—one home break-in and two shop thefts in the recent spate of Bolton crimes. The home break-in occurred at 72 Elm Crest Way, the Decker residence, and ten thousand dollars worth of electronics and jewelry were taken. Additionally, the Colonial Store lost five thousand in cash, stolen china dolls, and a broken cash register, and the Country Store lost one hundred dollars in candy. It's believed the criminals were under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Officer Barrone reminds citizens and shop owners in particular to lock their doors, deposit cash every day before closing, and report any suspicious behavior. Three teens have been questioned in regards to the incident, but no arrests have been made.

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COYOTES IN OUR CHILDREN'S PLAYGROUNDS

“Unbelievable, Mary, don't you think?”

I lean back in the red poppy chair and look up at her. She watches me, mouth open. Today, she's tracking everything I do. Other days, she stares up at the ceiling, or at some spot on the wall. But not today. Today she's more here.

I shake the newspaper, just to see her react. Her eyes flick back and forth to watch it. Then she looks back at my face. Yes.

"The article was written by Edgar Peterson."

I look toward the hallway. Wave to Marianne who is walking by to see her husband Chester, Chester who is in his sixties and loves water now. Since his accident. He had just retired.

"You don't know him," I say to Mary, "Edgar Peterson. But he's new in town. You wouldn't like him at all. Thinks he's a real *nature guy*. Goes out walking the trails every weekend in brand new hiking boots and socks pulled up to his knees. Told us: *You can return socks to LL Bean anytime, even years after you bought them, if they have holes*. Pretty cheap, don't you think, Mary? And his wife is this skinny, skinny blonde woman, five foot one, who sort of follows him around. It's creepy. He was at the town meeting the other night, bragging about this article."

I think for a second that she's smiling. See a twitch at the corner of her mouth.

"Oh, that's funny, huh?"

I laugh a little.

"Yeah, I guess it is. The socks. So, alright, the article: Coyotes have been spotted near Emerson playground during school hours. Because school's not in session for two more months, officials have called for a research team to try to capture and tag

the coyotes in order to track their movement. Biologists at Tufts—there you go, Mary, Tufts—say the coyotes may wander off come fall to find winter dens.

“Margaret Thompson of Orchard Hill says one of the coyotes came into her yard last week and ate from her strawberry patch. ‘They’re supposed to be nocturnal,’ she says. I imitate her voice—high and whiny. ‘I called Animal Control, and they said they won’t kill them unless they pose a threat to the population. Like, if they attack someone. I don’t think we should wait around for that. I’m keeping my cat Lucy inside for now, and I’ll be leaving the strawberries alone. I’m looking forward to hunting season.’

“Oh, god. Margaret Thompson, what do you know?”

I roll my eyes.

“Remember how she always came to school in shorts in the wintertime, Mare? Because she said her skin needed to breathe? Her mother was such a nutcase.”

I put the paper down.

“We have to go to another meeting to talk to the committee about leaving the coyotes alone. All this development, what do they expect? Danielle wants the coyotes to be officially protected by the state, or at least the town. No hunting at all. She hates that you can get a permit for it.”

I stare out the window at the big tree and the hill that rises up behind it, then the woods. The sky is clouding over, rain coming.

“We’re going to run into each other, I guess. Danielle’s fed up with them, the new

people. She says she's walking *a fine line*, because she needs their business but hates their politics. Hates what they've done to this town. A lot has changed."

I keep staring out the window. Late June and it's already humid, all the trees holding in the moisture and greening in that summer haze.

"Some people haven't, though. There's Mr. Heinz. The old curmudgeon, scowling at everyone around town."

The leaves are flipped, their undersides showing in the wind. That's how you know it'll rain. My father taught me that, looking out the big bay window of our house. Then he'd talk about physics, and the wind, and the pressure in the air, and I couldn't understand any of it. Then Mary would come into the room, and she'd nod and say yes and follow every explanation, and they'd wander into that other world of theirs.

"Stella's coming soon. In the beginning of August."

I turn back to Mary.

I look into her eyes. Blue, blue. But her cheeks are gaunt, caves of space between her cheekbones and her lips and chin. That thick scar that runs diagonally across her face, from just above her right eye, across her nose and cheek, all the way to the left side of her jaw, as if the glass was trying to slash away her beauty. Her black hair is thin now, almost wispy, and always flyaway around her head. When's the last time Mom came? She would hate to see her hair like this. She loved Mary's hair. When we were small, she'd spend ten minutes brushing it before bed. She did that in the hospital, too, for months after the accident, until Dad died, and she broke and couldn't stand to come so often.

I go to her beside table and take her brush out of the drawer. Very gently, so I don't hurt her tender scalp—all of us sisters have tender scalps, but now Mary's is even more so—I brush her hair back. Humming, like Amanda does, *you are my sunshine, my only sunshine*. It feels good to do something for Mary, instead of always sitting, reading: waiting.

Mrs. Bing rolls her chair past the doorway. Doesn't pause to look in. Amelia walks past in her white shoes—brand new and squeaking a little—and gives us a smile and a wave. She comes back to the doorway and leans on the frame.

“Hey, Junie, how's the orchard?”

“Great,” I say. There's a falseness in my voice—it came out too high-pitched.

“You okay?”

I smile, aiming for normal. *I'm fine. I'm fine*. “Just tired. Long day yesterday. I did something to my back. You know, getting geriatric.” I laugh, then look at Mary's knees pressed together, her thin legs, her pale white skin, and I stop short.

“I was just kidding, I—bad joke.”

She nods and smiles. “We're all getting older, right? Every minute. Don't push yourself too hard.”

“Oh, I won't.”

“Sure, you won't,” she says, and laughs.

Is everyone going to bother me about this, ‘doing too much’? Are they convening somewhere to plan an intervention? Jesus. I drop my eyes. Pull a strand of Mary's hair through the brush, careful not to let my anger ooze into my hands and hurt her.

“So,” I lift my voice and change the subject, still watching Mary. “Stella’s coming in a few weeks.”

“I can’t wait to see her,” Amelia says. There’s a pause. She’s watching me. Does she see a shake in my hands? The sense of discontent within me? The desire for Tony?

She pulls out of the doorway, waves a hand in.

“See you, June. Take a rest, okay? Take a day off.”

Her words ripple through me, a tide of annoyance. Who will take care of Mary and Amanda and our bills and the extra work at the orchard, if I don’t work this hard? And then I think: I am a martyr. Listen to me.

“I’ll try,” I say, and turn to look at her, reassure her with my smile.

She waves and squeaks off down the hall. The regular rhythm of her shoes on linoleum. I hear Maryanne say hi to Lester and Mrs. Bing laughs at something Amelia says.

“You know what the problem is, Mary? It’s that Stella and Gerald have all these secrets now. And, you know what else? Gerald’s never home anymore. He’s always off with Nadine.”

I put the brush down on the table and sit on her bed. She stares at me. Her mouth is open, and there’s a line of spit between her top teeth and her bottom. It shudders as she breathes in and out. There’s a gap on one side now, between her teeth, where she lost two in the accident, and another, a bottom tooth, is chipped into a fang. Her hair is smooth and curled around her face now, though. It’s tidy, as she would like

it. Next week, the hair stylist from the salon in Hudson will come through and shampoo and cut everyone's hair.

I sigh.

“Well, I *assume*, true, I don't know for sure. But he's always talking about her. Repeating things she says that are *so goddamned smart*. He *admires* her and *respects* her but thinks it ridiculous that I'm jealous.”

Mary blinks.

“He's just never home. That's all.”

She blinks again. Stares at me, watching watching. Follows me with her blue eyes. Watches my lips move. Sometimes, I stop speaking and just mouth the words, testing, and she watches just the same. Maybe it isn't listening. Maybe it is. Maybe she can read my lips. I don't know, don't know, don't know. It's torture, wondering. There's always an ache in my chest, a gripping in my stomach, watching her, thinking of her—what she was before, and what she is now. How none of us saved her. None of us tried hard enough.

“I know. I'm not there much, either. But he's come home at nine or ten every night this week. Not even dinner together. Things were good over the weekend, and now – gone again.”

“Well.”

I look down. Watch the linoleum floor. Count five specks in one white square.

I lean in and whisper to her, “I ran into Tony. Remember Tony? From when we were little? He's back.” I smile. I lean back and wait for her to react. What would she tell me? *Go and get into some trouble, Junie*, she'd say, *Stop being such a good*

girl. That's what she told me when she was in college and I was still home, in high school. Not drinking, not partying, not playing sports. Studying. I was learning Spanish, in addition to French, and planning on taking Mandarin in a summer course at Wellesley.

"Maybe you're right," I say.

I stand up and smooth her hair down one last time, as if I can get it to stay like this all afternoon, all night, through all her position shifts, physical therapy, clothing changes, and a bath, until morning. She stares up at me. Watches me move. So thin now. Her legs little sticks beneath the quilt. I think of the people who help their relatives die. That's what Danielle mentioned one day, saying it wasn't a suggestion but she had just been thinking about it, that if I felt that Mary couldn't live like this, if it was unfair to her, she would help me—but I cut her off and said, 'Stop talking. Just stop.'

I pick up the afghan from the chair and fold it, drape it over the back. It is red and pink, a Valentine from Stella, sent through the mail, that second year.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I say. "I love you, Mary." I blow her a kiss as I walk out the door, and I imagine her smiling back at me. As I walk down the hall toward the door, through the ammonia smell and the dim talk of other patients, I think—maybe I wasn't imagining. Maybe she did smile. *Did* she? I think she did. Yes. She smiled.

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NEW RESEARCH OFFERS HOPE FOR STROKE VICTIMS: Scientists implanted an electrode about 5 millimeters deep into the part of the subject's brain responsible for planning speech. After a few months nerve cells grew into the electrode, producing detectable signals....The embedded electrode amplifies neural signals and converts them into FM radio waves which are then transmitted wirelessly across the subject's scalp to two coils on his head that serve as receiving antennas. The signals are then routed into a system that digitizes, sorts and decodes them. The results are fed into a program that synthesizes speech which runs on desktop or laptop computer.

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PHANTOM

At the first rehab hospital, the one that gave Mary bedsores, there was a man who'd lost both legs. A land mine in Vietnam. He was on vacation last spring. He went off-track in a place where he should not have. Those land mines remain, waiting in the ground for some unlucky soul, not the enemy.

He was always itching, always restless. He wheeled himself down those brown-floored halls, saying, *Ah ah*. Because he felt his legs. They were gone, but he still felt them.

They itch, he'd say. *They ache*. And his wife would come and sit beside him and put her hands in her lap, and then set them on the bed beside her husband, and then put them in her lap again. *Do you want me to rub them?* she would ask.

Sometimes it was a plea: *Please, let me rub them. A massage might help*. But her

husband, he always said no. Said touching what was there would do no good. It was the missing part that ached. It was the missing part that hurt.

THERAPY

That afternoon, I call Stella. We catch up every week since she moved to New Mexico after college. She loves it out there, she says—the red dirt and the sun and the dry heat. It suits her, she tells us every time she comes home and complains about our east coast humidity, or our snowy cold winters, or the too-quick-pace of Boston. People in New Mexico are more laid back, she says, more in touch with the earth. She spends her afternoons outside dyeing fabric, her hands in vats of color underneath a tarp stretched between four poles. She’s emailed pictures. I imagine her blonde hair blowing in the hot wind while she works. Mornings, she sews, piecing or quilting with the fabric that’s already dyed and dried. She makes quilts of the New Mexico landscapes, hot red earth and blue skies.

Today is Tuesday. Usually, we talk on Sundays, because that’s when Stella’s free. For a potter, she leads a very structured life, I want to say. But I hold that in. I try not to start another squabble. Ever since Mary’s accident, we’ve been on tender-hooks with one another. I’m angry at her for leaving; she thinks I’ve martyred myself.

“There’s a new one we can try,” I say. “It’s brand new. It translates brain waves into language. The person just has to think of speaking.”

I’m sitting on the edge of the bed, and Amanda sits on the floor with plastic teacups, her stuffed animals beside her. She feeds tea to Bear and Hammer. (She named Hammer when Gerald was working on the living room.)

“Here,” she says to Hammer. She tips the teacup into his mouth.

“Junie,” says Stella. “How many of these things have we tried now? None of them have worked.”

“But *this* one,” I say. “This one is different. It’s *brand new*. It’s only been tried on a few people so far. This man from New Hampshire, he’s trying it. He had a stroke when he was younger. He was locked in. And now he’s making vowels.”

“But Mary isn’t locked in.”

“Momma,” says Amanda. “You want tea?” She stands and gives me a teacup.

“Thanks, Manda.”

“What’s she doing?” says Stella. “Can I talk to her?”

“Having a tea party with her friends.”

“The stuffed animals?”

“Yeah.”

I take the teacup and tip it into my mouth.

“Mm, delicious,” I say. “Thanks, little bird.”

I run my hand over her baby-soft hair. She has dark hair like Gerald, and little curls at the ends.

“I talk Auntie Sell!” says Amanda. She reaches for the phone. “Momma, phone! I want Auntie Sell!”

“Not yet. I just need one more minute.”

I rub her back as she reaches over my knees, but she wails when I don’t give it to her.

“Just a minute, okay? Hold on.”

“I want to talk to her,” says Stella. “Put her on.”

Amanda’s crying hard now. I hear the front door open and slam shut.

“I just want to tell you about this first. Gerald!” I call downstairs. “Can you come get Amanda?”

“You could just put her on the phone,” says Stella. She’s annoyed now. I could. I could have. Now they’re both upset.

“But I just need to tell you about this first,” I say.

I hear Gerald’s footsteps up the stairs, thudding towards us. He comes up and walks to me, and, without looking at me, picks up Amanda, who’s still grabbing for the phone. Her face is red and she’s wailing.

“Come on,” he says. He jounces her as he walks, and he sings her favorite song, *ABC*’s, and soon, she’s almost happy again.

“You want some juice?” he says as they descend the stairs.

“Yeah,” she says, and snuffles.

“So,” I say. “It takes a couple of years before whole words can work. You have to get to know the person’s language and speech patterns, and accents make a difference, so the computer makes all these adjustments—”

“What does Dr. Smalls say?”

“He’s a pessimist.”

I hear Gerald talking to Amanda in the kitchen, opening and closing the refrigerator, clattering cups in the cabinet. I’m sitting on the edge of the bed, and I trace the red tulip on the quilt. It’s the quilt Stella gave us for our wedding—white

with red tulips the size of my palm, and a border of green stems winding around the edge of the bed, and a pretty scalloped hem. Her friends made it, she said, just for us.

With love.

“How much does it cost?”

I don’t answer right away. Because, we cannot afford it. I know we cannot afford it. It’s the time we don’t have, the time in the rehab center, which costs us \$350 a day since Mary’s insurance ran out. We have maxed out every credit card, mortgaged our house and our parents’ house three times, and borrowed all we can from Stella and Merle. There is nothing left for this. I know. Even Danielle and Terence have helped us out, and all of our cousins, and Aunt Grace—everyone has pitched in. Everyone has given what they can. And yet.

“Well,” I say. “We’d just have to get into the next round of studies.”

Stella sighs. “I’ll be there next month. Can we talk about it then?”

I stare down at the red tulips against the white quilt, trace my hand over their appliquéd edges, their twirling green stems. Stella made this for us for our wedding, which never happened. We were supposed to get married, but we didn’t because of Mary’s accident. It seemed callous to do it without her here, when I was the one who caused her accident by making her drive to Bolton to try on her bridesmaid dress. Stella gave us the quilt when we moved in this house. She doesn’t usually make things this traditional, but she thought we would like it. The red and green are hand-dyed and inconsistent, variegated, which makes them more beautiful—the mark of her hand, she says—than industrial dyes.

“Nevermind,” I say, “I’ll figure it out.”

“Don’t get upset.”

“I’m not.”

There’s a pause. I shift gears, before she gets so irritated she hangs up.

“Tell me how Merle is,” I say.

Stella talks while she mixes paint for the pots. I hear, in the distance, chickens clucking. She must have her windows open, all year long. It’s just warm enough for us to open ours in the daytime now.

“Good, she’s good. Working at the U now, teaching some ceramics classes.”

“She succumbed to *the institution*?”

She laughs. It is the same light, high laugh of childhood, the lilt of her voice unchanged. She used to say that she and Merle would never be part of an institution like a university. They begrudgingly pay their taxes, but they’re otherwise “off the grid,” generating their own power with solar panels, growing their own food in a garden and with egg-laying chickens, and buying beans at the local co-op.

“Maybe,” she says. “She wanted a new challenge. You know.”

Something falls to the floor on her end.

“Shit.”

I smile, relieved to settle into this talk. I lie back on the bed and stare at the ceiling. It has a crack in one corner, a sign of the foundation settling. We’ll need to fix that soon. More money we don’t have.

“Why don’t you come here for a couple months this summer?” she says. “You can live near me; I know a woman who needs a housesitter for the summer. She’s

going to her son's place in California. You could live here for free. Gerald could write out here."

"In New Mexico? What on earth would I do there?"

"You could work at the farm down the road. I already asked them."

"You asked them? When?"

"I thought you knew about this. The other day when I was on my way home."

"Why didn't you talk to me first?"

"It's just an idea. I thought if there was some potential, a plan, you would consider it."

She doesn't understand real life, is the problem with Stella. She can run away, because she knows I'm here for Mary and our mother. She lives in a fantasy land, a quilter and her lover out on the western plains. For awhile, they lived in a goddamn *commune*. Gerald and I used to joke that they shared their underwear.

"I can't. I have commitments here."

"I know what *that* means—you can't because *I* left. Well. I did what you ought to do. Nothing's keeping you there. Nothing says you have to stay. I talked to Gerald about it. He agrees with me. Danielle could help your mother this summer."

"When did you talk to Gerald?"

"He didn't tell you?"

"Of course he told me."

"So, what do you think? A trial run in New Mexico. You can rent out the house in Bolton; people are dying to live there these days and drive into Boston, Gerald says. So you can see how it goes and even make a little money. No

commitments. And who knows, in the fall, there might be a job at the U for Gerald, and you could go back to school.”

I don’t say anything. What is there to say? My sister and my husband planning behind my back. Where am I in this?

“I told him I’d think about it,” I say. “I’m thinking.”

I imagine Stella hanging up and looking out at the long quiet landscape of New Mexico. I’ve never seen it, but I’ve seen her pictures—shots of her and Merle hiking into the hills, around the otherworldly humps of red striped rock, standing next to cacti, she and Merle in their shorts and baseball caps—and I’ve looked it up online. There’s red dirt and low shrubs, mountains in the distance. I imagine her walking into her neighborhood with its cafés and yoga studio, where she teaches. She’ll carry her yoga mat over her shoulder, blonde hair shining in the sun. She’s the child everyone always thought belonged to another family—all of us dark but her.

Downstairs, Gerald’s sitting on the couch. Amanda’s built a tower with her giant legos. She stands up and shows it to us.

“Good job, baby,” he says.

He looks at me, finally. “Hi.”

I flop down at the other end of the couch, watching his face, wondering when he was going to tell me about New Mexico.

“You’re home early,” I say.

“It’s seven.”

“Yeah. Early.” I rest my hand on his leg for a second, as I always would have. But it’s uncomfortable somehow. I move my hand into my lap. His knee is bent, his other leg draped over the back of the couch. I’m about to ask him about Stella, but he speaks first.

“I talked to Dr. Smalls today,” he says. “I hear we need to sit down with him soon.”

I shrug.

“I get milk?” says Amanda. She looks to Gerald.

“Sure, baby,” he says.

“I get milk, mamma!” she says.

I smile. “Good, go get milk.” My voice sounds tired, lacking the enthusiasm of Gerald’s. The repetition of our days wears on me. By naptime, when I’m home alone with her, I always long for the orchard and Danielle’s ebullience, the hustle of the employees, Omar and Remario joking with me.

I listen for her in the kitchen, the clink of bottles when she opens refrigerator door. Simon comes over and leans against my legs, panting. He needs to get shaved down for the summer.

“Junie?”

“Can’t we talk about it later?”

I think about Johnson Wheeler Financing, and what I still haven’t told him, how much in trouble we are.

There's the sound of the milk pouring from the carton into her cup, a thick sloshing sound. I glance into the kitchen, and the door is still open, running the cool out. I think of our bills.

"Close the door, honey," I say. I lower my voice, and try to sound casual.

"Nadine was at the meeting."

Gerald lowers his head a little, watching me.

"June."

"Just wondering why. She left before I could say hello."

He sighs.

"She wanted to see the politics here, over the Jamaicans, to see if she could help. She studies labor and agriculture. This is her thing."

"Right. The potatoes."

Now he laughs. "The way you say it, it's like the potatoes are the enemy.

I turn to watch Amanda. She stands again, puts the milk carton inside, and pushes the door closed.

"Good work, thank you."

She comes towards us with both hands around a blue plastic cup of milk. No top. This is her new thing, to pour her own milk. She loves to open up the refrigerator and take out the pint (we leave it in the door for her), and stand on the footstool and get her cup from beside the sink, and set the cup on the footstool, and pour the milk in. Very carefully. Concentrating so hard it almost breaks my heart.

"Momma," she says, "I got my milk."

"Great, sweetie Good work." And I've sunk back into my love for her.

Gerald presses his foot against my arm. "Promise me we'll talk about it," he says. He ignores Amanda and stares at me. Deep brown eyes. His sock is damp with sweat. I nudge it off.

"Yes," I say, "I promise."

He sits up and turns to Amanda, and his face changes—goes easy, happy, lights up.

"Amanda," he says, "Who poured that milk for you?"

"Me," she says.

"No," says Gerald. "Who really poured it for you?"

She stops and looks at him, the cup in both hands. "Me, Dada!" The milk shakes in the cup, sloshes over. She should be using a sippy cup, but we let her do this. I know there's milk on the kitchen floor that I'll need to wipe up before bed.

"No," says Gerald, "no no, that can't be true. Who *really* did it?"

She screams: "Me! My milk!"

And then he laughs, and she looks at him and laughs. It's a reckless footloose giggle. I remember that feeling. And I forget the conversation with Stella, and the problem of what to do with Mary, and I slide to the floor and reach for my daughter.

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BIRDS

My mother lives a few miles away, in the house that I grew up in, a two story noncommittal style, very eighties, a plain facade with a big bay window that juts out to one side and, along the back, sliding doors that lead out to a yard and ten acres of woods. The house is up a big hill, the driveway running through the swampy land, a little pond on the right, and up to the dry; this is called Rattlesnake Hill, where the snakes must have lived before St. Patrick came to woo them away. That's what Grandma told us when we were little. The most dangerous creatures that live here now are the hornets that nest in the ground, and the coyotes.

There's a rock garden out front, made of the boulders that were dug up when the house was built, and one big boulder remains in the front yard. Before the front stoop, great flat stones are laid out as stairs, and on the stoop, there's a three foot high petrified log, where sometimes my mother will sit and look out at the birds. She's a quarter mile from the nearest house; we can only see it in the wintertime when the trees are bare. Now, the trees are full and green, and the house is in its own clearing. We worry about her all alone up here, but she won't let us hire someone to look in on her every day. So, it's my job. Danielle comes on Wednesdays and Sundays, to help me out.

I go there in the afternoon, and sit with her. Amanda is off at the orchard with Gerald, getting blueberries for pies. We'll bake this afternoon. Danielle needs five by the weekend.

My mother sits with her bird notebook in her lap. This is a good sign.

"Have you seen David?" I say.

David is her friend. Boyfriend? Maybe that's the right word.

“Sh. Hear that?”

I turn my ear toward the window.

“No,” I say.

“Sh, listen.”

And then there come a high *Wheeeap! Wheeeap!* and my mother smiles.

“It’s a Great Crested Flycatcher. You hear it more often than you see it. It sits up high in the trees. Hear that? *Wheeeap! Wheeeap!* That’s the Flycatcher. And you know what’s strange?”

“What’s that?”

“It gathers up a snakeskin for its nest.”

I look out the window, at the thick woods. At the yard that slopes down to the woods, the grass in need of mowing, the big rock I used to sit on in the summertime and read my books. *Anne of Green Gables. The Little Princess. Le Petit Prince.*

“Exotic tastes,” I say. “Snakeskin nests.”

My mother laughs. Such a rare sound now, that I turn and watch her face. Watch her laugh. How her cheeks flush and her dark eyes sparkle.

“You look good,” Mom, I say. “What is it?”

She sighs. “I just have a feeling that something good is coming. I don’t know.”

She opens her notebook again, and runs her finger down the list of bird names, waiting to hear another.

“You know,” I say. “Dr. Smalls’s been pressing me about moving Mary. He’s asked to meet with you and Gerald and I this week.”

“The Tufted Tweet,” she says. “You know, those little gray birds.”

She looks in her notebook, scrolling for her last sighting of the tufted tweet. She has lists and lists of sightings in her loopy handwriting, page after page in various pen colors, dates marked on the left hand side.

“He called me in for a meeting a few weeks ago. He talked to Gerald, too.”

My mother sighs.

“You know, June,” she says. “Dr. Smalls is very easy to put off. Now, help me find the song for the female Cardinal. Can you look it up on that computer program for me?”

We got her a laptop last winter, after Dad died, thinking she could move it around the house with her to listen to music, books, and her birds—so she wouldn’t miss his voice and sounds so much. We were trying to ease her heartbreak, as if a laptop could make that better.

“Sure,” I say. I go to her desk in the corner of the room and put in the disc. Soon, the sharp rise of the Cardinal song comes on.

“Mom?”

She waves her hand at me, swatting my voice off. She closes her eyes. She can attend to this, the cardinal song.

“Listen,” she says. “You need to get quiet and *listen*, Junie.”

TO UNLOCK

In those months after the accident, I watched my parents age. The gray hair taking over completely what it had only teased before. The wrinkles deepening. A milkiness in the eyes, growing.

My mother kept saying, “Oh, Junie, go on home and get some sleep. You look so tired.” I knew she saw it in me, too.

Mary was in her room, connected to all those machines. The feeding tube. The oxygen in her nose. The doctors kept on saying that now, there was only waiting. Now, we had to give it time. The surgeries were over. The legs had been reset. The pins inserted. The plates screwed tight to bone. Everything would heal – the bones. The skin, already, scarring pink and purple in crooked lines. One streak across her forehead. Eight or nine other big leaping scars across her body – her stomach, her chest, her arms – and so many smaller ones. Nicks and divots where the glass and the gravel embedded themselves.

All of this would heal, the doctors said. The bones are making progress. The scars would fade in time. Now, we need to wait to see how the mind will do.

Then, after a few months, she had been moved been weaned off the feeding tube, and moved to a rehab hospital. But it was no good – she’d regressed, had to take the feeding tube again. After all that work. Now she stared away, would not watch us when we walked in the room. I thought she was angry.

That spring, my father leaned forward and sobbed into his hands. I had never seen my father cry, not when his own father died when I was nine, not when he and my mother struggled for another child, not even that year when three students in his class died in a car accident, his three best students, killed by a drunk driver on a corner near 495. A few miles from Mary’s accident.

But now, he leaned forward and sobbed. Overcome. His shoulders shook. His back heaved. He wore an old blue cardigan, the same one he used to wear to teach. He always said the moth holes gave him a scholarly look.

My mother came over and sat beside him, rested her head against him, cried, too.

A nurse walked by on her way to someone else's room. Her shoes squeaked slightly on the floor with each step. Someone in a wheelchair was coming toward us. I didn't look to see who it was. They kept on rolling past. Arms pushing forward, then pulling up, then pushing forward. The slow passing.

"All that potential," he said. "So smart. The things she could have done."

"She still can," I said.

I looked up at Stella on the other side of the hall. Her arms were folded. She wore her favorite red knit dress over a pair of jeans. Little bohemian.

She sighed and came over and sat down beside him. She said, "She was your favorite, Dad. I know, I'm sorry."

There was a silence. A long silence while my father wept. I think we were all waiting for him to say, *No, Stella, of course that isn't true – I don't have favorites*. We were waiting for him to say what all parents are supposed to say when one child is asking for some love.

But he didn't say anything. He sat up straight, and wiped his eyes, and sighed.

"Stella," I said. "That's not true."

I moved my hand off my father's back and sat up straight. Looked right at her. She shifted her gaze to me. She was tired of this process, exhausted from the ups and

downs, the hope and then another piece of bad news – the glass lodged in the base of the neck, the most difficult to remove – nerve damage – the blood thinners that can cause internal bleeding – one thing after another for eight months and no time to spare for anyone but Mary. Her hair curled out, away from her face, pushed back. Those blonde curls that never changed. The same haircut she’s had since she was five. Stella doesn’t get angry. She is the carefree one, who makes us laugh. She is the one who gets out of trouble without any punishment because our father has a soft spot for her sense of humor.

My father stood up and walked away, and I sat there with Stella and my mother.

“I don’t think he heard you,” I said. “Right, Mom?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said my mother. “Of course it isn’t true. You girls are just being dramatic. Stop it. Just stop this talk.”

“Well,” says Stella. “It’s true. It is. Mary’s his favorite, and it’s breaking his heart to lose his favorite. We’re not enough, you and I,” she says, looking at me. She looks back at my mother.

“It’s true. Mary was his best hope. Now he’s left with imperfect *us*.”

And she stood up, and walked down the hall, and left the hospital, too.

This is what keeps Stella away now. She says she is over all of that, but it’s not true. She is kept away by this knowing that our father was driven forward by Mary’s shining way. Mary is the vet. A dark-haired beauty. All of this in one. Brilliant. That’s what our father wanted from all of us – this brilliance that we could not deliver. Even

Mary, even she could not. Trying for it drove her to her death. Or, wherever she is now. Half-here.

The next time Stella came back, it was for our father's funeral last fall. She was stony and distant, and wouldn't curl up with me and commiserate. Maybe she was punishing herself, and wishing she'd come home before he died. Maybe wishing they'd made up. Maybe wishing our whole lives had unspun differently. Maybe she was still angry with him. I don't know. She hardly spoke to me that trip home. She called Merle every free moment she had. And then she flew back two days after she arrived. That was it. The last step in our family's disintegration. The long groan of life since then, a drone of days one after the other, of subsistence and bills and diapers to change, of waiting for Mary to return and making decisions—one after the other—about her care, of silence between me and Gerald, our lives suspended in no-man's-time. Eternal. Waiting. Until—this slight lifting inside, of Tony.

CHAPTER 3

TOWN MEETING

V.

A POSTCARD:

DEAR JUNIE ROE, YOUR PET SIMON IS DUE FOR HIS ANNUAL SHOTS: RABIES, RUBELLA, LYME, AND DISTEMPER. PLEASE CALL TO MAKE AN APPOINTMENT TODAY.

VETERINARY SERVICES OF STOW

Those shots will cost one hundred fifty dollars. If I don't get them, Simon's at risk, and Amanda, too, for living with him, her face always in his, her hands on his mouth. He's so forgiving with her. I call the vet. It's Beth Rhondstat's office. She was a friend of Mary's from Tufts. It's humiliating to ask, but maybe she'll give me a break.

"Can I get the shots without paying up front? Just the rabies, at least?"

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Roe," says a receptionist I've never met before. She must be new. Her voice is nasal, her words clipped. She isn't sorry to deliver this news.

"What happens if he's late getting his rabies shot?" I say.

"If he has an encounter with another animal, he'll have to be quarantined for six months."

"Another animal?"

"A dog, a cat, a raccoon—any sort of wild animal." A pause. "Anything else?"

There are voices in the background, and a bark. Customers waiting. I should ask to talk to Beth. I should insist. Or beg. Or both. But it's humiliating. I can't afford my dog's shots.

"No," I say.

I hang up. One more thing I can't take care of—not just the car or the house, but our dog. I'm ashamed of myself. My stomach clenches. I close my eyes, press my hands against the wall, and take a deep breath.

TOWN MEETING

Everyone is here, packed into the town hall meeting room, a side room in the Grecian style building at the top of the hill in the center of town. Beside the town hall, there's a Unitarian Church, where, in the basement, there's a preschool that Amanda will attend next year, if they give us a scholarship. In this room, there are five rows of chairs, wooden floors, a low ceiling. Someone's pulled open the windows, and a fan spins at the front of the room.

Michael Barrone, the police officer, stands at the front of the room. His father, the chief, couldn't come tonight, so he's handling this.

"When are you going to catch the thieves?" says someone in the back, a woman's high-pitched voice; I don't turn quickly enough to see who it was.

"I've been locking my doors and windows at night," says Mrs. Molloher. She's in her sixties now, bun tied at the base of her head. "Never had to do *that* before."

Michael nods and raises his hands, as if to press down the discontent.

"I hear you," he says, "and believe me, we're working on it."

His cheeks flush red from rosacea like his father's does, too. Michael grew up here, went away, and came back five years ago with his family, worn out from LA violence, he said. He needed a small-town beat. He was the one who investigated Mary's accident. Deemed it accident, not suicide. He nods.

Mr. Heinz stands up in the front row. He shouts, pointing at Danielle, just a few feet away from her.

“It’s probably *them*. You gave them bicycles! People see ‘em all over town at all hours.”

Terence, beside me, tenses. He whispers, “Jesus. Is it nineteen-sixty-two, or two thousand twelve? You’d never know.”

Danielle stands at the front of the room. “By *them* you mean the workers we’ve had on the farm for twenty years?” Her voice is strong and carries across the room without a microphone. She pushes up one sleeve of her pink plaid shirt—pink her one occasional feminine concession. The workers arrived two weeks ago, and things have changed. They’re in town now; they have freedom to come and go from the farm, where before, they were picked up in Hudson every day, and dropped off again every night. Out of sight, out of mind, as my mother would say.

“You’re talking about Adam and Derrick and Leroy. Romero, Chris, Omar. Those are my friends. I’ve known some of them since I was a little girl.”

She glances at her father. They argued over the housing for weeks, him arguing it cost too much to build and would change the culture of the farm, integrating family and workers, and she saying it was worth the investment, that they owe the workers this much, and that she welcomes the change in how their families will interact. Didn’t they have the workers to thank for their success? she’d ask her father, over and over again.

“Living in *Hudson* for twenty years,” says Mr. Heinz. He’s an old farmer. He harvested tobacco in western Massachusetts before moving here in the nineties to retire.

“What happened at *your* farm, Heinz?” says Danielle. “Who picked your tobacco?”

“They didn’t live there.”

“They had to have lived somewhere. Where did they live? Twenty to a two-bedroom house somewhere, off in Maynard, or the woods of Stow?”

“They weren’t Jamaican,” he says. He emphasizes the middle of the word: *Jamaican*, which we should take to mean: they weren’t black.

Terence, the lawyer, stands. He clears his throat. While Danielle loves public speaking, the thrill of converting the flock, Terence balks at it. He’d like to stay in the background. Nevertheless, here he is for Danielle.

“I’d like to remind everyone,” he says.

“Can’t hear ya!” Ed shouts, right in front of us.

Terence raises his voice: “That federal regulations require us to provide housing for guest workers. I’ve printed up the requirements of the H2A, from the Federal government website.”

He hands them to Jeannie and asks her to pass them around.

She nods, officious. Jeannie loves a task.

“Furthermore.” His voice cracks. “We’ve improved housing by providing it onsite, rather than in substandard conditions in Hudson.”

Mr. Heinz, at the front of the room, turns to Terence. He wears overalls and a black t-shirt. Classic farmer. He’s heavy now, and his sun-damaged skin hangs from his neck like a turkey wattle.

He says, “They came every year, those houses passed the inspections; must’ve been fine.”

I glance over to see Danielle’s father, on the other side of Terence. He’s rubbing his forehead. He hated the idea of building the houses right on the farm, thought it would be too much crossover between their lives—entanglements, he said—but Danielle insisted.

Everyone in town is here, it seems—the new people, against one wall and sitting up front, dressed in pill-free cardigan sets and Capri pants, smelling of perfume, expensive purses on their arms. The people who have been here forever sit on this side of the room: Mr. Phipps’ daughter who lives in Hudson now but comes because of her father’s trust, the Everley family, the Joneses, the Addlesteins, the Gardiners, the Mollohers. Even my mother makes it out, a little bit of hand-sewing in her lap. She embroiders. I haven’t seen her sew in months. Beside her is her boyfriend of sorts, Don; they bird-watch together.

In the midst of the new people, a woman stands up. “I’m Gloria Stanwich,” she says, “and I’m here to represent the United Farm Workers Union.” She has a long, blonde ponytail that hangs down one side of her chest.

“Great, a *union*,” hollers Mr. Heinz from the front row, where he’s seated again.

Gloria ignores him. Her voice is soft-pitched, and everyone gets quieter to hear her.

“We represent the rights of the workers, and when Danielle got in touch with me to let me know about this dispute, I felt we should make our position known. We

support improvements to worker conditions. Many Jamaicans are taken advantage of at farms across New England, simply because they need the work and don't have much bargaining power. What Danielle and Terence have done is a great improvement to the way workers live when they're here. I inspected those houses in Hudson, and though they passed inspection, it was just barely. Many workers live on trailers on New England orchards, which is fine, but the McNally housing far surpasses the standard and gives workers comfortable sleep and cooking areas. Don't they deserve it? They're supporting our tourist economies."

She sits down, and so does Terence. Danielle's father shakes his head and grumbles. I hear him say something-my-ass.

"The men swim at the pond every night," says Katherine, Carla's mother. I think of her salon dreams. "My daughters go down there alone."

"You're saying the men might hurt your daughters?" Danielle says. She waits for a reply, staring at Katherine, who raises her eyebrows and purses her lips.

"Well," she says. "Isn't it possible?"

Danielle shakes her head. "That's flat out racist."

"They're working too *hard*," says Nadine Schwartz, in the back. She's a professor of cultural studies with Gerald at Blanchard. And why is she here? I turn to see her standing next to him, his arms crossed. Did he bring her to speak to this? Why is she here? *Here*? I turn back to Danielle, and she glances at me, knowing I'm fuming.

Nadine says, "They're working fourteen hour days!"

“They’re long days,” says Danielle, “but we pay them well, and they always request to come back to us.”

Katherine’s husband stands. “How about that crime in Maine, by the blueberry picker last year?”

“That was an isolated—” says Danielle.

“Isolated, my ass!” shouts Mr. Heinz. “Same thing happens all over the place, but we don’t hear about it. Unsolved crimes.”

“That’s our own kids doing the stealing!” I say. “It’s not the crew.”

Danielle nods to me, grateful.

“Sure isn’t *my* kids,” says Mrs. Molloher. “So whose is it?”

She looks around. I think of Bruce and his friends, their petty crimes last year—graffiti and pot smoking at school. He says he’s cleaned up his act, that he doesn’t hang out with them anymore.

“Most often,” says Danielle, “any crimes that happen are *against* the workers. Remember the van crash that killed fourteen, a few years back?”

“Why can’t you hire locals?” asks one of the new people, Fitz Gonzales.

“We try, every year,” says Danielle. “They always quit within a day or two. You want to try it this year, Fitz?”

He shrugs and makes a snorting sound.

“I’ll take that as a no,” she says. She turns to the crowd again. The hair at her temples is frizzing and turning out, like wings. She’s sweating. But she loves this, the talk, being the center of attention, getting people to understand what she sees. She was

made to be an advocate of some kind, a lobbyist, the town's campaigner for preservation of our woods and wetlands.

"What about the coyotes!" shouts Ed, in front of us. "I want to talk about the coyotes." A whiff of beer rises off him when he speaks and moves, and I glance over at Terence and roll my eyes. He grins back at me, arms crossed. Then turns to watch Danielle. They're a good team, the way they fight for each other.

Edgar Peterson, in his khaki hiking hat and socks pulled over his jeans to protect against ticks—his standard uniform—says, "The coyotes aren't hurting anyone. I've written an article that's forthcoming in the paper this week, and you'll see—"

"That's a crock of bull!" says Ed.

I haven't talked to Gerald yet, about Mary, nor about the call from the bank. How will I break this news to him? It makes my stomach clench and ache. I turn to look at him again, and Nadine—*Nadine, here, in our town meeting, acting like she belongs*—and she's whispering something to him. What is she whispering to my husband?

Dr. Smalls, town mayor, Mary's doctor, slams his gavel. "That's enough," he says. "We'll get to the coyotes. One thing at a time. *One* person speaks at a time."

"I'm getting a new rifle and offering shooting clinics at my house," says Ed, "anyone wants to learn to hunt for the coyote season this fall." He shouts, half-standing.

"Sit down, Ed!" shouts Dr. Smalls. "Down!" He pounds the gavel twice.

Ed sits. Jeannie leans over and whispers something to him, spinning the back of her hair with one hand. She's anxious.

Ed shouts, "Sorry, doc!"

Dr. Smalls nods. "Fine, Ed." He looks to the crowd. "Any more comments on the matter of the thefts?"

I look around to see if Willow is here. Willow, Dr. Smalls' daughter, who found Mary that day. But no, I don't see her. She wouldn't come to something like this, I guess. She's preoccupied with three small girls, and a trucker husband who's hardly home to help.

Danielle *is* good to the workers. She makes them her own restaurant-experiment meals a few times a week, and has staff dinners on picnic blankets in the orchards, driving her truck up with pots and pans in the back. She asks them to tell her what they think of her restaurant experiments—ragu, jerk chicken, pork tenderloin. She doesn't skimp. She considers them family.

Is that enough? To make up for the fact that they do jobs no one else wants to do? That they leave their families for months at a time, to work fourteen hour days here? That without them, the farm couldn't function? They make more here than they'd make back home, but for the farm, it's far less than they'd pay an American worker. And to call them family when they're paid workers—isn't that condescending, in a way?

How far have we come from the segregated communities of the sixties, I wonder, and how much has that mindset rooted deep and stuck? When I was small, there were just the Singhs, Indian immigrants, a few Latino families, and the Browns

and the Dalls, who are African-American. Devon Brown worked at Gen-Rad all his life, down the road. They made their home its own small world. Barb has a garden that would win every year at the fair if she entered, meandering rows of tulips and daffodils and irises in the spring, and then fields of wildflowers buttressed by the hedges that Devon clips into animal shapes. A topiary. It took years to grow, and now it's in its prime. Barb says Devon "won't ever leave the creatures." A dinosaur, an elephant, a giraffe, a toy soldier, and a family of giant rabbits. Once a year, they invite the town children to walk through.

Most of the rest of the town is Irish, French-Canadian, a few Italians. In Hudson, there has always been a Portuguese community; I remember my mother taking us to the Portuguese fish market, and the dress shop run by the Portuguese sisters. Hudson is where Danielle's father housed the apple pickers on the cheap, in an old falling-apart Victorian whose third floor was uninhabitable in hot August. But Bolton is less industrial, originally farmland, with almost all single-family houses, slightly more—now very much more—expensive.

Still, in every town like ours across New England, migrant workers from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Central America pick our blueberries, tobacco, raspberries, and strawberries. Every bucolic scene you drive past on the highway and on the little winding roads is cultivated by people who are here just for a spell, making minimum wage, and most likely, not treated very well. Sleeping in airless bunks with dirty showers. Long, one-story cement block buildings. Or in trailers. Contending with rats. Gathering eggs from beakless chickens in warehouses with millions of the poor beasts, to make less than two hundred a week.

The Jamaicans work the orchards.

Upper-crust white New Englanders—even middle and low-crust, the soggy bits, New Englanders—don't talk much about it, but their lives are driven by people of color from other countries, paid far less than they've ever been paid, to do the jobs they won't do, to help spin their economy, pave their roads, fix their bridges, send their children to school. This is America.

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GONE

On Wednesday, Gerald's gone early and home late. We don't cross paths, except to sleep side by side in bed. The same on Thursday. On Friday, the same: he is gone. On Saturday, he is gone. On Sunday, he is gone. The only mark of him his dented pillow, messy sheets.

Gone, gone, gone, working every day. Even on the weekends.

I think of Nadine again. And her potato famine research. Bees rising up my throat, the sting of it. I know it can't be her, but I think—it must be. What else can keep him away like this?

Every time we get close again, he pulls away. Drifts off. Fades, fades, fades.

When he comes home on Sunday, I am reading in bed, my hair still wet from the shower. I worked in the orchard all day. I set my book down on my stomach.

“You’ve been away all week. How about we do something tomorrow night?”

He sits on his side of the bed, pulling on his socks. He loves to sleep in socks, even in the summer heat.

“Sure,” he says.

“Oh, shit, the orchard party. I can’t.”

“Okay.”

He does not care, either way. Wonderful. He leans back against his pillow.

Always, it is this. The closeness and then the distance. Why?

“What happened?” I say. “I thought things were good again.”

He sighs. “What do you mean, good again?”

“You know, we were having fun again.”

“Well, you’ve been at the orchard all the time, or visiting Mary.”

“I’ve been around. I’ve been here with Amanda every night for dinner. You’ve been leaving at six and coming home at eight.”

“I’m almost done with the book, June. I’m so close.”

“Will you at least tell me about it?”

“I’ve *told* you. You know all about it.”

“Not lately. Not since you started those interviews.”

He clears his throat. “Okay, tomorrow. All right?”

“Fine,” I say, and he turns off the light. It makes a little definitive *click* and the room goes dark.

E-BAY

Amanda plays in her room, talking to her babies—her stuffed animals. I go to the computer in the blue desk. I keep my laptop there. I log into e-bay, and I look up “roll-top desks, eighteen sixty,” which is when my mother said this desk was made. She gave it to me last year, from our father’s study in the basement, so I’d have a place to translate. She wants me to keep on translating, because I love it, she says. She and Mary agreed on that.

I smell of sweat and one of my fingers is still sticky from baking pies. I lick it clean. Wipe it on my leg. Then scroll through the list.

Antique George III Mahogany Desk, circa 1800, for sale for \$4,282. Cutler and Son signed walnut Oak top desk, for about the same. Further down, there’s an oak roll top, small, dated to the eighteen hundreds, but for three hundred dollars. Who made this desk? What’s it made of? I’m going to have to get it appraised, and that costs money.

Who could appraise it for me? Maybe Mrs. McCrae knows someone. Our only “antique” shop is run by the Devons brothers, who are hoarders without much knowledge about what they sell. Their shop is so full there’s furniture piled to the ceilings, lined up on the sidewalk on Saturdays and Sundays all fall to lure in the apple-pickers. Some of them fall for it. Some of them stop, and buy. Maybe they know how to find the gems in the pile.

I don’t know anyone who will appraise it for me. There’s a big auction house storage facility and offices in Hudson, but they’re big-time.

I crawl under the desk to see if there’s a label or signature, but there’s just more blue paint.

Amanda comes to the doorway with a stuffed dog in her arm, Simon wagging his tail behind her, panting. He trots in when he sees me under the desk, wiggles around me, licks my face. The whole house smells like strawberry rhubarb pie, delicious.

Amanda laughs. “Momma, you playin’ fort? Can I play?”

She runs to me, leaps into my lap. I’m hunched under the desk, my neck arched forward.

“Sure, we can play fort,” I say. “Let’s pretend we’re in a cave in Thailand. Does that sound fun? Do you see the bats around us?”

I point and she nods, looking up at the bottom of the desk. She’s reached the age of pretending, that beautiful turn at two and a half, until four or five, when anything is possible, and I love it.

“What’s bats?” she says.

So I explain, about flying foxes and fruit-eating bats, and how the small ones who come out at night around here save us from all the biting mosquitoes of our wetland town.

“They keep us from itching,” I say, and make a *bzzzzz* mosquito sound effect. “The bats eat up all the biting mosquitoes. You know, when you get an itch? That’s from a mosquito.”

She nods. Is she understanding this? She presses her hands against my cheeks and pulls them forward, making my lips pucker out. She laughs.

“You look funny.”

“Thank you,” I say.

I bat my eyes, to make her laugh, and she does. And I laugh, too, the sick feeling in my stomach fading.

“When I do this with my eyelashes, that’s called batting my eyes. They move like bat wings, see?”

“I like bats,” she says.

She crawls off of my lap, and runs back to her room flapping her arms, Simon following with a wagging tail.

“I’m eatin’ up aaaaall the bugs!” she yells as she goes.

Gerald still isn’t home. He doesn’t come home that night, not at all. When I wake up in the morning, his side of the bed is still made, the red quilted flowers draped over his pillow. Where did he sleep last night? A fury. The spiraling up of panic inside me. Nadine.

0

ORCHARD

First thing in the morning, after I’ve dropped Amanda at Mrs. McCrae’s and had my swim at the pond, I come to the orchard, and the hills are still covered in mist. The leaves and blades are dewy. The fruit looks like it’s been lifted from a still-life and planted on the trees, rosing. It’s very quiet, and I walk up the hills, my feet getting soaked through my sneakers, and I dream of a life that we had years ago, before Mary

was hurt, before Gerald and I had this distance between us, before my father died, when everything was still good, and we were full of hope.

This morning, I opened an e-Bay account, and searched the house for things I could sell. The blue desk is old. I could try that first. Maybe I could get a few hundred dollars for it. The dishes I got from my grandmother? The quilt Stella gave us? No. I can't sell that. The old chest my mother gave us when we moved in here. I'll look in their basement; they must have things rotting down there that are worth something.

I stand on the hill and look out at the rows of trees and the winding road below, the stone walls between the houses and the barn, the tops of the woody trees stretching on and on. Was Gerald with Nadine last night? Where was he? Should I call him now and see if he's at the office? Or maybe this is my license, to do what I want. I'll let it lie.

The orchard has been organic for the last ten years, and it's Danielle's baby. She grew up on this land in the old farmhouse that her father lives in now. The house is tilted with age, and needs a new roof this year. Danielle partnered with her father for the last decade, and two years ago, she took over caring for the place, since her father's too feeble to do it now. We spent last fall scraping and painting house, a burnt orange that Danielle picked out.

"It's garish!" her father said when he saw it. He shaded his eyes like it was blinding him.

Danielle laughed, standing on the ladder with a paintbrush in her hand. "It needed some cheer," she said.

“Now everyone will see it from highway, I suppose,” her father said. He walked away shaking his head. He said over his shoulder, “Don’t do this to anymore of the buildings, hunh? Jesus.”

As kids, Danielle and I would race through the orchard, climbing the fruit trees even though it wasn’t allowed, running into the woods at the top of the hill, apples, pears, or peaches stuffed in our pockets for snacktime later. We had a fort that we’d made out of fallen logs, a teepee that we could crawl into and have secret meetings, crunching into our apples, the juice dripping down the sides of our hands. The floor was covered with old pine needles that we’d gathered for a carpet, and they’d mark the backs of our legs and stick to our skin when we adjourned and stood up for home.

Two years ago, Danielle’s first as full owner, was a bad year for apples—too much rain, and a late frost in the spring, so the crop was small. But last year was good, a bumper crop, and this year, so far, has been good, too. May was dry enough, and the blooms came in just when they should: May 12. No scab, she says, no scab, and she crosses her fingers and rushes from one end of the orchard to another, her big work boots thomping on the hardwood floors of the barn and the tasting gazebo, and out through the fields.

School got out last week, so today, Thursday, I teach Carla and Bruce (tenth graders, who took Spanish, not my French classes), how to use the register. They’ll start right away, and then there will be four more on staff for August and the fall, plus all the guest workers, pickers and packers, who will be here in a few more days: June 24.

“This one?” says Carla.

She points to the red “sale” button, and touches it with a fingertip, purple nails. She turns her head fast so her long ponytail swings. She and her mother get manicures in Stow. I’ve chatted with her mother, Katherine, when I’m on bus duty and now know too much about the difference between the four salons in Stow and Hudson, our neighboring towns. She talks about opening one in Bolton.

“Don’t we have a salon already?” I said.

The buses pulled up at the curb, four in a row, and let out the students.

“That’s a *hair* salon, sweetie,” she replied. Sweetie. I bristled. “I’m talking about a full-service salon—hair, nails, waxing, massage.”

“Waxing.”

“Right, you know, some women wax their—”

“I *know*, Katherine. I have left town, you know, and look!” I pulled up my pants leg. “Clean shaved! A real woman.” I can’t resist the sarcasm. Does she know I’m mocking her? The truth is, I hadn’t shaved in weeks until this morning. I did it on a whim, hoping it would make me feel more put together. Or, I hate to admit this: sexier. Gerald and I hadn’t (still haven’t) had sex in so long. I’ve been wondering, is it just me? That I’m not attractive anymore? I took three Women’s Studies courses in college and one in my Masters program. And I know—god, do I *know*—that simply shaving my legs will not solve our problems. That there are wide rushing currents beneath our marriage that can’t be glossed over with a little fix. Nonetheless, I shaved my legs, hoping.

Katherine glanced down at my hands, eyebrows raised, as if to disagree. I keep my nails short and unpainted. The few times I've had them done, I've smudged the nail polish right away. I'm too busy with Amanda and the orchard, or working in the yard. We can't afford manicures, even if I wanted one.

I straightened and crossed my arms. "Wouldn't you be in competition with Shear Madness, then?"

She shrugged. She was wearing an Easter green velour sweatsuit, pink lipstick smoothed across her lips at seven fifteen am. "That's the way of capitalism, isn't it? Competition keeps us going."

I glanced to my left. "There's Ed," I said. I turned and walked away from Katherine and her bleach-blonde ponytail and her salon dreams.

Now, in the barn, Bruce watches Carla. He watches everything she does. When she talks, he blushes deep and red. He lives over on the old Evans land, where his father keeps piles of scrap metal in the yard. Bruce's jeans are always worn and brown, washed only every now and then. His hair is greasy and swept to one side. Lately, he's been hanging out with a group of boys who make trouble at school—skipping class, hanging out beyond the back hill to smoke, and one day this spring, they all came to school drunk. They were suspended for a week. Bruce promised Danielle that he's on the up and up now, reformed.

"Right," I say. "Very good."

Bruce smiles. He runs his hand over his hair, pressing it behind his ear. "You learned fast," he says. "You're smart."

I smile at his compliment. Oh, Bruce. Not this one, don't choose this one. You're going to get hurt.

"Thanks," says Carla. "It's easy. You try."

I show him all the buttons and he presses the drawer open and closed, open and closed. The sun comes in through the two small windows up high on the eastern side of the barn, making slats of light through the dusty air behind us.

"You got it," I say.

He does it again, then slides his eyes over to her with a wily grin.

Carla laughs. "Bruce," she says, a flirting scold.

"Let's move on before I get nauseous," I say. They give each other a look—*what is she talking about?*

Around us, the shop is quiet, no one here yet. The flood of customers won't start for another week or two, when they take their tourist summer jaunts with the kids. Until then, we have the regulars, the locals, who buy their vegetables from us. Carla and Bruce were the first to apply in April, so Danielle hired them, along with four college kids we know from town, who were home for spring break.

The barn ceiling rises high and airy with beams running across the length of the barn. Big wide doors open to the road and to the hills behind us, slide across, so the whole thing can be open in the hottest months. There are two walls of refrigerated goods—cider and frozen pies and tarts, and two shorter walls of shelves with candy (maple sugar leaves, Boston baked beans, carmelized peaches and pears) and fruit and other delectables, arranged in circular shelves in the middle of the room, too. It's my job, this morning, to sweep and clean the barn, give it a spring overhaul.

“Can I try again?” Carla says to Bruce. They don’t see me anymore; this is between them.

Bruce swaps places with her. Carla jumps up dramatically and holds the sale button down. The register dings over and over and over again.

“Okay, Carla,” I say. “That’s plenty. You two have this down.”

She giggles and presses the button again, looking to Bruce for approval. He laughs.

I lift her hand and give her a little look that says, *enough*. The teacher look that I’ve perfected these last two years.

Bruce covers his mouth. He wears a black bracelet with silver studs. I wonder where he got the money for it.

I give them the rest of the tour, through the packing shed with its conveyor belt and stacks of crates for when the apples come, through the gazebo that we’ve dubbed the wine tasting room (a newer, better one will be built next year), through the haying shed and the barn and the separate staff room, fluorescent lights and the smell of hay, where they can hang their coats. Finally, we walk out back to the pastures, where once sheep would graze. Danielle’s mother spun the wool into yarn and sold it to the local knitting shop. But that shop closed long ago, and Danielle doesn’t have time for sheep with everything else she’s doing here. The orchard hills rise up beyond the pastures, the trees in even rows. There are orchards on the other side of the road, too, across from the barn’s front door.

“Where are all the cows?” says Bruce. “Isn’t this supposed to be a *farm*?”

“They never had cows. They used to have sheep, but not anymore,” I say. “It’s just an orchard and vineyard and *vegetable* farm now.”

“Not even any goats? I thought I signed up to work on a *farm*? This isn’t legit.”

Carla’s made him brave. I know he’s just doing this for her attention, but I want to tell him, ‘You’re a sweet boy! You’re not like this. Don’t do this for her.’ Carla makes a scoffing sound, then laughs. She pushes her long hair behind her shoulder and looks down at the floor.

“Nope,” I say. “No goats.”

“Damn,” he says. “Maybe I *don’t* want to work here. If there aren’t even any *goats*. What about sheep? Any sheep? Pigs? They gotta have a pig around here. A cat?”

Carla bursts out laughing and pushes her hands into her pockets.

“You’re in luck, Bruce. There’s a cat. And Danielle’s corgis are here sometimes.” I smile. “You two can head back to the shop. I’ll be there in a minute.”

They scuff off, dragging their feet over the dirt path, and laughing about the goats and how much this job will suck all summer without any goats.

I sit down on the bench in the staff room, underneath a row of aprons and work shirts, pieces left behind from last year’s crew. For now, it’s quiet. The rush has not begun. The apple trees are just blooming. The fruit is starting to come up in green shoots, lining the hills. The vines are budding green leaves, and soon the grapes will come. Then the tourists will come to Bolton, which has always been an orchard town, since the lime mills went under. Gerald knows the whole history of this town—from the Native Americans whose trails ran from Bolton to the Boston Harbor, which they

walked in the spring to eat seafood all summer, and then walked back in the fall, to stay in the woods and hunt in the snow. Then came fur trade. Then the slaughters. Now, there aren't many Native Americans left here. The town was built in the seventeenth hundreds, and the oldest houses line Main Street and are tucked into the hills around town. Ours was built in 1802. The stone walls run through the woods, criss-crossing, making farming grids and dividing up the trees, leading further and further into the woods, to the ponds and streams and wetlands, where once they'd cleared and marked their fields. Only a few big trees, older than one hundred years, remain. There were the lime mills—you can still see the quarry, carved out of big glacial rocks on the north side of Main—and then when those went under, the apple orchards cropped up. Now, we're becoming a *bedroom community*, and people commute here from Boston. We're growing too fast. Oversized houses with plastic siding are plunked into sub-developments all over town. The new families don't get along with the old. When I was young, the town population was fifteen hundred.

Today, there are still five orchards in a town of four thousand. Danielle's is the second-biggest, and the only one organic. Soon, the throngs will be here with their children and their friends from out of town. For now, there is a lull.

I clean the barn, sweep and mop and wipe and shine. I haul buckets and heavy pallets and crates out behind the barn, in the shade of its peaked roof, making stacks. As I clean, I retrace our conversation—what Tony said about his divorce, what I said (was I flirting?), how he leaned back in the chair and looked up at the tree. How the sun fell on his face. His olive skin. His beautiful hands, long fingered, perfect rounds at each

fingertip, strong. I move quickly so I can get this done before lunchtime. Didn't we say, lunch again today? Is he planning on it, as I am?

When it's done and my back aches, I walk back up the hill and sit in the grass, looking out. It's eleven thirty. I made it in time. Should I call him, or will he call me?

Why am I acting like a *teenager*? Like Carla and Bruce. I don't really *care* if Tony calls. I don't care if we have lunch. No big deal. Maybe we will, maybe we won't.

"How did Carla and Bruce do?"

I jump. Danielle. I didn't hear her come up behind me. My heart races.

"You all right, there, Junie?" She laughs.

"Yeah, just, I was—"

"I know. Daydreaming."

She kneels down beside me and pulls off her work gloves, tosses them to the ground, and reties her hair back, catching up the loose strands around her face. She's sweaty from weeding the tomato fields with Manuel, her only year-round employee. He lives in Hudson with his family of five. Five years ago, he was working on a farm in Maine, picking blueberries, and stopped in Bolton on his way back south with his family, in September. They met at the country store. Danielle hired him on the spot, and eventually, he became her farm manager.

"Those two are going to be trouble together," I say. "I see a summer romance blowing up before our eyes."

She laughs. "Good for them! We could use a little romantic drama around here."

I think of Tony. Stop. Stop thinking of him. It won't do any good. *I'm* not going to have a romance. But we'll be friends. Gerald's doing what he wants, and so will I. We just had a lunch. So? No big deal. I look out at the hills. They turn blue in the distance.

"You're such an optimist," I say. "What did your mom always call you? Foolhardy."

"They're kids," she says. "Can't save them from themselves."

I shake my head and sigh. "No. Where's the crew?"

"Up in the peach trees today, fertilizing. How are things with Ger?"

I turn to look at her. She's watching my face, trying to read how I'm doing. I want to tell her that Tony's back in town, but I can't say his name, afraid she'll see what I'm thinking. I won't be able not to smile. I'll reveal my feelings. Maybe she hasn't heard he's back yet.

"Didn't they already fertilize the peach trees?" I say.

Danielle shakes her head, still kneeling. "No. That was pears last week. So. Ger?"

Danielle doesn't fall for any of my tricks. I give in.

"Same," I say. "He says he can finish the book this summer. He's trying to get it done before they make the cuts at Blanchard. And, he's pushing for that dean position."

They've been threatening faculty and staff cuts all year, but no one knows when, or how many, or who. It has them all on edge, like waiting for the axe to fall, Gerald has said.

Danielle nods. Reaches down for her gloves.

“I hate it,” I say.

“I know.”

“He’s always there. He’s never with us. He didn’t come home last night.”

Danielle looks up at me. “Really?” She pauses. “That’s odd, but—he isn’t doing anything. He’s trying to save you.”

“With Nadine’s help.”

Danielle laughs. “He’s not sleeping with—what’s her name, again?”

“Nadine,” I say, sliding out the second syllable with a sneer on my face.

“Didn’t you see her at the meeting? Standing right next to him? What was that about?”

“Yeah, I saw. He isn’t sleeping with her. I’d know. Terence would tell me.

And anyway, Gerald never would. You know that. No matter how bad things get,”

Danielle says, reading me: “He isn’t going to cheat. Those two are just friends.”

I don’t know if that’s true anymore. She doesn’t see the look on his face at home, or feel the distance between us. How cool he can be now. Would Gerald tell Terence? He’s changed. He’s harder now, resentful, and talking to Stella, scheming to get us out of Bolton. Is he still the same man who wouldn’t cheat? Am I the same woman as when we got married, one who wouldn’t cheat, either?

“I don’t know,” I say. “He shares all his research with her. He doesn’t tell me about it anymore. It’s like I’m shut out.”

Danielle shrugs. “They’re friends. He found a colleague. He needs that, especially if he wants to keep that job.”

I try to accept what she's saying. She knows him. She'd tell me if something weren't right.

"Well, he talked to Stella about having us to New Mexico for the summer. There's some house that needs sitting. Isn't that ridiculous?"

Danielle stands and scratches her side. Her t-shirt is full of holes. She wears them until they're threadbare, because she hates to waste the fabric and the cotton and all the labor that went into making them. She's given me diatribes on the growing, weaving, dyeing, sewing, and shipping of cotton goods in the US and abroad. Some companies, she's told me, use slaves to pick their cotton.

"Hunh," she says. She turns into the sun and closes her eyes, basking. One of the trucks rolls down the dirt road below us, tools clattering in the bed.

"You don't sound surprised. Why would we go to New Mexico?" I say. I spread out my arm, incensed. "What's there for us?"

Danielle turns back to me, blocking the sun so I can't see her face, just her dark silhouette.

"Fresh start?" she says. She pulls her gloves back on.

I feel my back twinge as I stand and we descend the hill, my thighs sore. I'm not in orchard shape yet. My jeans from last year are tight. I feel my stomach roll over the waistband, pressing more as the day goes on.

I shake my head. "Leave my widowed mother and infirm sister? I don't think so. And what about you and Terence and Alice? And the orchard?"

Below us, in the fields, Carla and Bruce sit on one of the fence rails, feet on the second rail, arms stretched long to hold the top rail, leaning forward a little.

“June,” says Danielle. She stops, grabs my forearm. Her gloves are rough and cool from the dew. “Look at me,” she says.

She’s going to go mother on me now, she’s going to try to convince me to do this. I can feel it coming. She’s on their side, too. I turn, reluctant.

“Why not think about it? Just for the summer, right? Why not try it out? You know we’ll miss you, but we can survive without you.”

Even though I know that’s true, it stings. Don’t they need me here? Aren’t I irreplaceable?

“Well. Then.” I feel myself turning red. I come up with the reason: “How would I make any money?”

“There’s always someone who needs help in the summertime. I’m only paying you just over minimum wage. You can find that elsewhere.”

Mary in her hospital bed, thin legs, scarred face, hair scarecrow-dry. My mother in her darkened house. My father, gone. The car, Mary’s car, hitting that tree. The glass in her face.

“Do you want to eat with me and the crew tonight? I’m making root vegetable chicken pot pie, with a crumble top instead of a crust. It smells amazing. I made it last night. Eat with us. It’ll be fun. Romero wants to see Amanda again. He misses his baby boy. And Omar could use some laughter. He still hasn’t heard about his wife.”

She’s trying to sweeten me out of it, get me onto something else—dinner. Which would be good. I want to go to dinner, and relax with everyone. I’m worried for Omar, whose wife is waiting for test results—the possibility of cancer. But, I’m

angry, and I can't quench the anger. Her hand is still on my arm, and it bothers me now.

"You're not supposed to *agree* with them," I say, and my voice sounds like a dejected child's. I pull my arm away from hers and walk ahead down the hill, faster, even though my back is sending sharp signals to slow down and I'm ashamed of my tantrum. I keep going, and feel the dew soak through my sneakers, into my socks, against my skin. As I get closer to the barn, Carla's laugh sings out. Bruce says something in a mumble that makes her laugh even harder.

*

MINIMALLY CONSCIOUS STATE: The person shows minimal but definite behavioral evidence of being aware of himself or herself or the environment. This evidence may include responding to simple commands, making yes/no gestures, or speaking intelligible words, albeit often incompletely or inconsistently. Sometimes individuals in minimally conscious states may be inappropriately diagnosed as vegetative. That is because, even in a vegetative state, individuals can respond to stimuli; to declare a personal minimally conscious a doctor must find evidence that he or she has at least some level of awareness.

*

After I've picked up Amanda at Mrs. McCrae's—who said, as always, in her Irish brogue, *She was so good, dear, what a sweetheart*, touching Amanda's back with her arthritic hands, decades of sewing stored in them—which can't be true every time (doesn't she misbehave for other people, or is it just me?)—I decide we're going to the pond. I'm still in my dirty orchard clothes, dirt stains on my knees and bottom from moving cartons to the back of the barn in preparation for the harvest. These old jeans are tearing at my right knee, and the waistline presses into my belly when I bend down. But they're what I have. In the morning, before Carla and Bruce arrived, I swept out the tasting gazebo, where the customers will sip and buy wine all summer. Danielle and I stacked tomatoes, two varieties of lettuce, kale, broccoli, and onions, up on along the low shelf in the barn, and pushed open the two big front doors for the on-their-way-home-from-Boston customers in the afternoon and evening.

In the back, Amanda kicks her legs against the carseat.

“Do you want to go to the pond, sweetie? I think we need a break. What do you say?”

She lifts her head to look at me in the rearview mirror. I catch her eye.

“Yeah!” she screams. “Yeah! Pond!” She kicks her legs harder—*thud, thud thud thud*.

I smile. “Good! Let's go.”

I keep going down one seventeen, almost to Harvard, and just before *GenRad*,

I

turn right into the winding road through the woods. I think about Tony, and our lunch, his hand on my arm, our laughter—it's been so long since I laughed like that. We said

we'd have lunch again this week. Didn't he say that? He wanted to spend more time together, catching up. Benign.

My cell phone is on the passenger seat. I can see it out of the corner of my eye.

And the

choice is easy. I pick it up and scan for Tony's number (already in my Contacts) and I press "Call."

*

INCREASED INTRACRANIAL PRESSURE: *Early after a severe injury, changes in the brain can lead to elevated pressure within the skull, which can cause further damage if not aggressively controlled. A doctor may intervene in a number of ways:*

- *By using a ventilator or a bag valve mask to make the person hyperventilate. This reduces the amount of carbon dioxide in the blood which, in turn, makes blood vessels in the brain constrict, reducing pressure.*
- *By implanting a catheter to drain excess fluid.*
- *With medications that decrease pressure, such as Mannitol.*
- *In extreme cases, by removing part of the skull (craniotomy), which allows the brain to expand beyond its normal space.*

*

AND IT'S EASY

Amanda's already soaked, playing in the water. It's too cold, really, to swim, for her, but she's happy and laughing. She's hardy, like Mary always was. Mary would dive into the water no matter what season, day or night. Even in the wintertime—though she'd race right back out, huffing, hollering, *Cold! Cold!* her limbs red with the chill.

The year our father joined the Polar Bears club, Mary went right along with him. They

chipped a hole into this pond, in February, and they both plunged in, lifted back out by the old men surrounding them. Mary was only twelve.

That was before Dara almost drowned here. After, the Polar Bear club took a respite. They reconvened a few years later, this time at the coast, at Wingaershaek Beach on the north shore, diving into the sea. We went to watch that year, perched on the rocks that line both sides of the beach, huddled in our winter coats. Between the rocks, there's a wide flat stretch of sand. The men ran from their heated cars, over the sand, into the surf, up to their waists, and then dove under. Then right back out, into their wives and husbands and friends waiting with towels, back into the heated cars, home to hot showers.

As they raced out, my father congratulated his friends, and Stella and I ran to the car to reenter the warmth. We all went for fried fish at a place in Rockport.

It was easy then. Wasn't it? Maybe not for our parents. They had financial struggles, and breaches in their marriage. But for us sisters, such easy friendship. Mary climbed into the car after us and we were tucked into the backseat and driven off for food.

I guess we fought sometimes. I guess we each had our secrets, and the tensions between who was closer with whom when. But, looking back, it's so much simpler than this.

I don't know.

A car pulls up, tires on sand, and it's Tony, his old green Saab.

He gets out, slams the door, waves.

"Hey!" he calls.

“Hi,” I say, not loud enough for him to hear. I raise my arm and wave. I shouldn’t have asked him to come. He walks toward me in his old saunter, sure of himself, barefoot in worn, stained khakis, and I half expect him to play cowboy again, drawing an imaginary gun from his hip, aiming, shooting, then blowing the smoke off the end.

Amanda holds my shoulder and watches him approach, wondering who’s coming.

“That’s Tony, Manda,” I say. “He’s our friend.”

There’s a thick sense of foreboding in me, because now this isn’t coincidence: I *made* this happen, and he’s here.

He reaches us, and sits down in the sand, his shoulder touching mine. He leans across me and says hi to Amanda.

“Hey, sweetie,” he says.

She turns, still holding my shoulder, and looks at him. It always throws me how Amanda can stare anyone down without getting self-conscious. When she does it to me, I think we can read each other’s minds. She knows I don’t love her enough. She knows I’m a shitty mother who longs for the orchard when I’ve been with her for hours alone.

“This is Tony,” I say. “Can you say hi?”

“Hi,” she says. She whispers. She’s not usually shy. She ducks behind me and hides.

I pat her behind, keep my arm wrapped around her, and let her get used to him.

“How are you?” I say.

He puts his hands behind him, leans into me quick and pulls back again, playful.

“How are *you*?” he says. He smirks.

Tony’s never had trouble finding women, I know this. I know that’s he’s a flirt, so sure of himself in ways that Gerald never was. I fell for Gerald’s sweetness. But first, Tony’s confidence lured me. We were best friends until sixth grade, until that first kiss. After, I betrayed him and he found someone else. Many someone else. He was a heartbreaker, he played baseball, he chewed tobacco and, at night, drank in the fields with all the cool kids. Our lives split apart and diverged.

“Just fine,” I say.

I pretend I’m impervious, unaffected by his flirting. Even so, my skin flushes, and I’m hot.

Amanda lets go of me and wanders across the sand.

In the space between my body and Tony’s, there’s an electric charge, my shoulder drawn to his. My skin prickles, like I’ve seen a ghost in the night.

“No wind today,” he says.

We both stare out. Both our knees are pulled up to our chests, both our arms wrapped around our knees.

The black water is calm. The sky is dark with clouds, like the hush before a storm. Across the pond, on the far shore, the pines and maples stand tall.

Dara swam here, and then she nearly drowned, and her brother had to live with that for the rest of his life—with his sister on a ventilator for months, with her death,

with his decision to come here with her and swim, when it was only April. I always think of them when the pond is this still.

“We were supposed to have lunch, weren’t we?” he says. His voice is playful.

I’m not answering. I should answer. I look at him, and my voice is caught, a flutter in my throat, a stir that bangs against my chest, seeking escape: *speak! say something!*

I cough.

He doesn’t look at me. Mary taught me that trick with animals that are afraid, horses especially—don’t look directly at them, but sit or stand calm, gaze downcast. Show them you’re not a threat. Talk in a low voice. Wait. Be patient.

“Momma!” Amanda calls. She’s just at the edge of the water now, in my line of vision, wandering from rock to rock. She holds up a shell to show me.

“Looks like a snail,” I say.

Ah. And now my voice is released.

“I wasn’t hungry,” I say. “Are you?”

He shrugs, still staring out—maybe not trying to calm me but to avoid me, I think now. I’ve watched *The Horse Whisperer* too many times and now I’m falling for that man-tames-woman bullshit.

“I just wanted to see you again,” he says. “Don’t care about lunch, really.”

I look at him, his profile staring out, his perfect straight nose with a subtle bump in the center, his full lips, and he turns to me, and grins that Tony grin.

“Oh,” I say. “Ah, ow.”

My back twinges from holding onto my knees too tightly. Tony touches my knee.

“You okay?”

My feet fall and touch the sand. I lie back.

“Just my back, it’ll be fine in a second. Come over here, Panda,” I say. “So I can see you.”

“No,” she says. She sits down by the water. She’s shivering from the chill of her swim.

“Things aren’t good, are they June?” he says.

He looks down at me. Once, we were so close that he could read my mind. We’d race through the woods together, into the treehouse, down the long trails that went for miles into conservation land. We made teepees of fallen branches, sold pussy willows door to door to our neighbors, picked wild blueberries, caught crawfish in the stream near his house, slept side by side on sleepover nights. My parents loved him more than me, I used to joke, when he stayed for his sixth dinner in a week and they doted on him over spaghetti.

“It’s fine. It’s not so bad,” I say.

Amanda hums, digging in the sand. Things are fine, things are fine. If I just gloss over—But the phone call from the loan agency, and the dread of another year teaching high school French, and Gerald and Nadine and the job he took that’s so much less than what he wanted. He wanted the two/two load in Minnesota. The research grants. The sabbatical years. The day to day repetition of my life. And we’ll never have enough money—we don’t have enough to save Mary. We don’t have

enough now to survive. Always, in the back of my mind, there's our account balance. Today? Five hundred seventy two dollars. If I buy groceries and gas and dog food, that will be one hundred less. The meeting with Dr. Smalls. The compression of my life between two closing walls.

“Our house is about to be foreclosed on, Gerald might lose his job, we're sinking in debt, my mother is depressed, my father is gone, and Mary's in a rehab center that Dr. Smalls says he won't help us get covered by insurance anymore. But, you know, things are fine,” I say, and I'm laughing. Now that I've said it out loud, it's funny, the extent to which we are sunk.

My laughter sinks into a sigh. “Oh, you know, Tone? How you think your life is going to be something extraordinary, and then it happens, and it's just a normal kind of life? And it's hard. So *hard*.”

He nods. “I felt that way during my divorce. But, you're in a bad time. It won't always feel like this.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Danielle and Stella seem to think we should run away to New Mexico like Stella did.”

I look up at the clouds, then close my eyes.

“My mother's told me some of the story,” says Tony, “but I don't really know what happened. When she crashed? What happened? No one knows why she crashed, right? There was no cause? And, since then—what's happened since then?”

I shake my head. No. I want to tell him, but it's such a long story. Gerald used to push me, trying to pry open my sides, get me to talk about how it felt, all of this.

But it's easier just to keep plowing forward. If I stop and think too much, I'll get bogged down, and I'll never move forward again. I'll fall apart.

"Too much?" says Tony. "Sorry, June."

He touches my leg.

"Sorry I asked."

His hand is electrifying. Can he feel my goosebumps rising to his palm? I stare out at the water, and I have Amanda in the corner of my eye, playing in the sand, singing *You are my sunshine*, to herself. The water is dark and quiet. No one is here. No one is saying I *have* to tell. It's been so long, now, almost four years. Maybe it will feel good to unravel it all.

"You heard. You must have heard from your mother."

"I did. Yeah, I just thought, maybe you'd want to talk about it. But I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked. I wasn't thinking—let's talk about—"

It's overcast and cool, a strange day for June.

Silence. He doesn't know what to say.

"—about my failed marriage!" he says. "How about that for laughs!"

He chuckles, and I laugh with him, disarmed.

There's Amanda singing, *you make me haaapppyy*, and the sound of a fish flopping, that great gulp of water.

The sound of the wind in the trees.

No one is here. There is only us. No one can hear us, not for miles. The development has not spread this far yet. It is still all trees here, next on Danielle's list of protection areas.

“I can tell you,” I say. There’s a calm inside me.

I haven’t talked about it since my father died. I closed up the story, and sank everything into bringing Mary back. Gerald tries to pull it from me, how I’m feeling—this, that—and I turn away. I go quiet.

“Okay.”

Amanda starts over again: “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.”

He leans forward, arms on his knees, and looks at me. Those cheekbones, those green eyes, those arms. But he is not grinning now, no. Nothing wicked in him, no mischief. This is Tony. Sweet old Tony with the red winter hat and the older brother who teased us every day.

“It was September.”

I stare out at the water, the black water, the surface still. No sun shining it up. Just dark. And it isn’t Mary I think of. It’s Dara Singh. Rising up from the black pond, to the surface, and walking toward me, blue eyes shining, blue eyes watching, those blue eyes all the time seeing. Everything and all of this, my whole life unspun for her to see.

He reaches out and touches my shoulder. Amanda’s drawing in the sand with her fingers. *You’ll never know dear, how much I love you.*

“We let her go a long time before that. I don’t know how it happened.”

I look at him. Thinking: I cannot tell this story. There is too much, it is too deep and sad. I cannot tell it all. As much as I can, though—this much:

“She was drinking a lot. For awhile. I thought that’s all it was. My father always went to check on her during college, and I thought it was because of the

drinking, or to make sure she wasn't working too hard. And she drank coffee all the time, to stay awake to study. That's why I thought she was so wired, at the Colonial Store. But then, we found out at the ER that she was on adderol."

Maybe I don't want to tell him this. It's been our secret, in the family, and now I'll betray us all?

He touches my arm.

"She took pills to stay awake. I guess. I don't really know. All we heard was that it was in her blood. And then I started thinking back, and she was antsy when we ate at the Colonial Store, right before the accident. Her friend Alan Ball came to the ER. I called him. I thought he could call Jefferson, but just Alan came. And he said, something about pills—as if it just slipped out, and when he saw I didn't know, he wouldn't say any more."

I shake my head and look back at the water. The black water with its sheen of white here and there where the lightest parts of the clouds hit. The green faux-grass-covered raft out in the middle with a ladder down one side.

"I found bottles of pills in her apartment when I cleaned it out. They all had animal symbols on them. To disguise them, I guess, she put them in there."

"Jesus," says Tony. He shakes his head.

I don't say anything. I nod. I look out at the raft. Amanda lies on the sand now, and hums, kicking her legs and arms into the sand, laughing to herself.

"I'm a fish, momma!" she says.

We went to the Boston aquarium this spring, with Danielle and Alice, a special occasion for Alice's birthday, and Amanda loved the fish. We imitated them when we stood in the glass tunnel. She's been doing it since then.

He says, "Why don't you go see Alan again, and talk to him?"

I remember the feel of the raft underneath my feet, that fake plastic grass, the scrape of it against my thighs when I pulled myself up from the water. And how strong I was then, all those swimming muscles. Days in the pool. Days in the pond.

I don't ask him, because I don't want to know everything I did not see. Did I know and turn my head? Or was I really so oblivious, caught in my own life?

Swimming in the night, I was strong, a strength that Mary taught me. I beat Gerald and Tony to the other side, the water slipping from our bodies when we stood on the other end.

"Just ask him," says Tony, "and maybe you'll feel a little better. Knowing."

I shake my head. "I don't think so."

I think of the rumors that we heard, after, how people said Mary did it on purpose. How the police investigated, and asked us questions—was Mary depressed? Had she been suicidal at any point in her life?—the hospital counselors asked us questions. And Michael, the new policeman, our old friend, he put a hand on my father's shoulder—twenty-five year old Michael—and said, *I know it wasn't, Mr. Roe. I know it was an accident.* But someone at the hospital told, and someone in town heard, and then everyone thought that's what it was, and I couldn't discern in their looks, in the weeks after, which brand of pity they were offering—the pity for her accident, or the pity for a sister and a daughter who didn't want to live.

Something inside me shifts and closes, a wall rising, sealing me in. I close my eyes.

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

He gets up and goes to sit beside Amanda. I open my eyes and turn to watch. She eyes him, watches him sit down, but doesn’t move away. She sits up, onto her bottom.

“Did you find a snail?” he says. “Can I see it?”

She waits. Then scoops up the snail beside her and opens her palm.

“Wooooow,” he says. “That’s a good one.”

She nods. “Mm-hm,” she says, emphasis on *hm*, an upbeat tone that reveals her pride.

“Let’s show your mom what a good snail you found! Will you come with me to show her?”

“Okay,” she says.

Why does she always have to defy me? Why can’t I always be patient enough to work around her defiance? But with a stranger, an outsider, she’s agreeable, easy, even. Mrs. McCrae says she’s a *dream*. A dream! But with me, everything’s a fight. She’s testing every boundary.

They walk toward me. She crouches down by my face, and I see her skin is covered with sand.

“See, Momma?” she says.

She holds her hand out and shows me the snail shell, empty. She’s so close she breathes into my face.

“That *is* a good one,” I say. “Good job, Panda.”

I smile at her, and touch her face with one hand. Push her hair off her forehead.

“We should get you home and warm, okay, baby?”

“K, Momma,” she says. And now we are in sync again.

Tony reaches down one hand to help me up. I take it, waiting for the electric shock between us—but it’s nothing, just skin on skin. Both our hands are sandy, and the grains chafe a little as he pulls me up.

“Another time?” he says. He smiles.

“Another time,” I say. I want to leap into him, press my body against his, but I smile and look to Amanda. She’s covered in sand, and her skin is pale from being too cool.

I pick her up, back aching, and hold her close against me, one arm beneath her, one against her back. She shivers. I rub her back. She rests her head sideways on my shoulder, and now she’s my little bird, and I can protect her.

And we’re in our car, and driving home, heat blasting. I didn’t wait for Tony to pull out of his space in the sandy lot, nor to follow us down the dirt road. I didn’t even look at him as he got into the car, or as he slammed the door.

I drove away, and left him there in his green Saab, and I turned up *Free to be You and Me*, which Danielle gave to Stella last week. Whenever we had a sub in the first grade, we’d get to watch the movie. When she gave it to me, she reminded me of our days upstairs in her bedroom, singing every song word for word while jumping on her bed.

Amanda and I sing along all the way home:

There's a land that I see, where the children are free, and I say it ain't far to this land from where we are...Come with me, take my hand, and we'll live—to a LAND! where the river runs free! to a LAND of the shining sea! to a LAND! where the horses run free! And you and me are free to be, you and me.

We both shout the song, Amanda with delight, me with a cathartic pathos that I'd be embarrassed for anyone else to see.

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REPORTS AT THE POND: *Residents have filed complaints recently about late night activity at the pond. Katherine Holmes called police to report that she saw smoke rising from the beach when she went to the pond to pick up her daughters on Tuesday night. Upon investigation, police found no evidence of a fire. Four men were swimming at the pond and reported that they had not seen a fire. On Wednesday, two mothers [names withheld] reported that they were uncomfortable when five men rode their bikes to the pond for a late afternoon swim. No investigation was made.*

LAW

In law school, we thought she'd really settled in. Found something she loved. She's challenging herself again, said my father, it's good. My mother said she worried. Said, I don't know, remember at Columbia? All that stress? My mother made her boxes of tea. Calming tea. De-stressing tea. Antioxidant tea. B-vitamin tea. Echinacea tea.

I'd call Mary from our little Michigan apartment, walls painted grass green to camouflage their bumps and holes.

"I'm coming home in three weeks," I'd say, "Do you want to have lunch? Do you want to go out for a drink this weekend? Why don't you come for a visit out here? Come see us."

"Oh," she'd say, "Junie. I am so busy these days. You have no idea."

"I'll come see you, then," I said.

"Maybe at the end of the weekend. Okay? I'll call you."

I'd call her again, two weeks later. "I'll be there," I said. "Alright?"

Finally, I'd drive out and see her. Stay with her all day Sunday, and she would seem the same as ever. Accomplished and poised and smart.

"This is Mickey," she said that first year in law school. "He's graduating this year."

I shook Mickey's hand. He smiled. A slick, smooth grin.

"Good to meet you, June," he said. "I'd better run now."

"Bye," I said, and waved as he ran out the door. "So. Boyfriend?"

"Oh, you know how it goes." She sat on her couch, sun falling in behind her from the window.

"I do. He's in line with a few others."

She grinned, then shook her head at me and laughed, long black hair shining.

And she did seem fine. Except. She handed me the phone later, so I could tell Mom and Dad I was on my way home. And when she held it out to me, her hand

shook. This little tremor. I watched it shake, and she looked at her hand, and tossed the phone to me, saying, “Here, slowpoke.”

She laughed a big laugh. “Tell them I’ll come home for dinner Wednesday. I promised.”

“Okay,” I said.

When I got back home, I asked my father. Does she seem okay to you? None of the old trouble?

“She comes for dinner every week,” he said, “I think she’s fine. Not to worry, June.”

He patted my leg. He wandered off to the kitchen, to bring my mother tea in bed. She had a cold. She stayed in bed all weekend.

I told Gerald about it, too, and he said I was probably overreacting, that if everyone said Mary was fine, then she was—she was fine. “Stop worrying,” he said. “You’re such a worrier.”

He poked my side, a nudge. We were sitting in bed together, books spread on our laps, reading. It was almost time for final papers, the rush I hated. Days we’d sit at tables on either side of the center wall of the apartment – one in the bedroom, one in the living room. Sometimes, tired and sick of the work, we’d tap on the walls, little messages to each other. Our own Morse code. *Time for grilled cheese* was four taps. *I’m dropping out of school* was six. *Meet me in the hall* was five. That meant it was time for a break. Time to slip into bed. We always wanted each other, back then.

DIAL

Once Amanda's in bed, Gerald still at work, I do laundry, marching up and downstairs. Simon waits for me with a wag every time I ascend. I think of his shots. I could ask Danielle to pay for them? But no. She's given too much already. I can't ask. I pat his orange head.

"I'll figure it out, Simon," I say. "Just don't play with any coyotes in the meantime."

Fold Amanda's small shirts and jeans, tiniest socks. Gerald's button-downs. He used to dry-clean them, but now, I wash and he irons them. The feel of the cloth in my hands is soothing. I let the folding become a rhythm. I try to lose myself in this.

Maybe Tony's right. It would probably be easy to find Alan again. I think I still have his number. And I could just ask—what did he know? Maybe it would help, to know, instead of all these gaps I try to fill with my imagination—Mary drinking alone on weeknights, Mary taking pills before tests, Mary crying alone in her apartment, miserable. Was it like that? Was she sad? And why did she push so hard? I think of our days together, sisters in the house, before we moved away for college. I thought, earlier today, how easy it was then. But who am I kidding? It was never simple with my sisters. It still isn't. New Mexico. I let out a sigh. There was always jealousy, competition, measuring ourselves against each other. It was layered, and we loved and hated each other equally sometimes, and we fought and mistrusted and then divulged to each other our deepest secrets, worst fears, biggest hopes. *When I grow up, I'm going to be a doctor*, Stella told us one night in a tent in Maine. *I'm going to be a movie star*, I said. *What will you be, Mary?* We waited for her, on our backs looking up at the red ceiling, where the nearby streetlamp fell through (our parents only car-

camped with us). *Mary?* We waited. From the tent beside ours, our mother called, *Five minutes, girls!* We waited. I could hear the crickets and the frogs in the pond nearby, and an owl, and the family in the campsite next to ours talking low. Until finally: *I'm going to be a ghost*, she said. *What!* Stella hooted. We laughed at that ridiculous answer, giggling together, tickle-torturing Stella, and then we fell asleep intertwined, the heap of us sisters.

I find his number online. Alan Ball. A simple name, but there aren't many in Grafton and around Boston. He wrote his name in a card that he sent right after the accident; I remember the big, loopy letters that looked like a child's first attempts at cursive—a little wobbly, slanting forward. And now, there he is on my screen, in the room with the blue desk. Revisiting. He lives in Wellesley, so he must be doing well for himself. Occupation: veterinarian; age: thirty-eight. Easy. I copy his number from the White Pages onto the notepad by the laptop, and I think: I'll call tomorrow. I need some time to think of what I'll say. Tomorrow, though. Yes, tomorrow, I'll call. And there his name and number wait like a harbinger.

IN FEBRUARY SNOW

When I asked my father, three years ago, he said he did not know. He shrugged and looked away. It was winter, I was pregnant, and Mary had been healing (we thought then it was healing) for four months. We walked through the snow to the shed. We were going to shovel the walk for my mother, who was sleeping still. Seven am. My father said I should not be shoveling. Said it was too dangerous.

“Dad,” I said, “the doctor said I should stay active.”

“You can push the snow,” he said, “don’t lift.”

“All right,” I said.

We took the shovels from the side of the shed where they hung on red hooks. He handed me the long flat shovel, the shovel for pushing, and he took the square-headed one. We turned and walked into the yard. He closed the shed doors behind him and latched them shut with the wooden peg that spun on a nail. Twenty years ago, he made this shed with Mr. Crennell next door. There are pictures of the two of them smiling on the roof, both in old army fatigues and t-shirts, holding hammers.

We started in the front yard, working our way from the slate steps to the walkway down the hill, then down the longer flight of stairs that led down from the yard to the driveway, and then to the drive, which would be plowed soon. To the left, our mother’s rock garden was covered, lumpen white.

“I found something,” I said. “At her apartment.”

My father didn’t say anything. He shoveled the snow, heaving, his breath making little clouds in the air. He wore the brown winter coat with the black collar, the same wool coat he’d owned since I was small.

“In the drawer of her nightstand, and in her purse, and her medicine cabinet.”

“Well,” he said, “I don’t know what it could be.”

“Pills,” I said. “She’d been taking pills.”

He shoveled harder, his face red. The sound of shovel against slate, a heavy scraping noise that hurt my teeth, fingernails on a chalk board.

“That so,” he said.

I stopped and looked out at the yard. The sun was up and bright, sparkling on the wide stretch of snow that sloped to woods. It was quiet. There was only my father's shoveling, the rhythm of the scrape of slate and the soft sound of snow landing in a pile. And in the distance, the plow moving from house to house, the long scrape of the blade on concrete and the rattle of the tire chains. I leaned against the shovel. Little clumps of snow fell from the branches at the edge of the woods.

He stopped, stood up straight, and groaned. "Do you remember the fox?" he said.

He held his back with one hand.

"Why don't you let me do this?" I said. "I'll call Danielle to help."

"It's good for me," he said.

I shook my head. "You do too much."

And I was thinking of my mother. I was thinking of how my father had tried, all these years, to protect her. This year, especially, how he had tried to keep her from knowing too much. Which was impossible, of course. She knew as much as all of us.

"Sometimes at dusk, you'll catch them running off to hunt. You remember how we used to watch for it in the morning?"

"Yes," I said. "I do."

We stood for a moment, silent, staring out at the snowy yard.

"I wish Mary was here," I said.

He nodded. He leaned into his shovel and lowered his head. I turned and saw him hunched in his old brown coat, two leather-gloved hands clutched together on the handle.

“She’ll be okay,” I said. “She’ll be alright.”

He straightened up and looked at me. His cheeks were red, his eyes a little watery. They always watered in the cold. His hat was pressed hard over his ears. An old blue wool hat my mother had made years ago.

“I knew,” he said, “about all that.”

And for a second, there was quiet in the air, complete silence, the snow not tumbling from the branches, the plow not plowing, the chickadees not moving from one place to another. It was quiet, and still, and in the stillness, I waited for some answer. I could not speak. Did not know what to say. I knew this was confession, that I was not supposed to judge. I stared out at the woods. I thought I might be sick. He knew. Of course. All those years driving up to check on her at Columbia, at Tufts. He knew she was driving herself into something dark, knew she was studying too hard, eating too little? He knew she was pushing too hard? He knew, he knew. And another later, by her bedside, he died.

Then my father turned and started shoveling again, and I walked around the side of the house, toward the shed, to get the salt. Walked off to the rhythm of the shovel on the slate and the snow landing off to one side, scrape-ah. scrape-ah. scrape-ah. The rhythm of this slow cold year.

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NUTRITION: *An unconscious person must be fed through a feeding tube. At first this will generally be a nasogastric (NG) tube: one that goes down the nose and all the way to the stomach. For a variety of reasons, however, NG tubes should only be used for a short time. If a person is unable to eat normally for a longer time, typically a feeding tube is placed directly into the stomach.*

*

RING

The next day, I don't go to the orchard. It's a stupid decision, and petty—as if I can punish Danielle by not showing up, when it's us who need the money so badly and she who could replace me easily. But I need some time to think. Danielle thinks we should go to New Mexico? Gerald is thinking about it, too? He came home after I'd fallen asleep—though I tried to stay awake to talk about this—and left before I woke. This morning, his pillow was dented, the sheets tossed.

Now, it's afternoon. I'm home with Amanda and the house is silent, Amanda down for her nap, finally, after emerging three times and being put back to bed three times. She's gotten stubborn about the naps.

“I can't go sleep,” she said. She'd come back downstairs and stared at me, her blanket in one arm, her hair tousled around her head. In these moments, she looks so much like Gerald did when he was young—discombobulated, a little bewildered, sweet.

Her belly stuck out beneath her blue PJ shirt; I'd have to go to the Hudson thrift store again. I drew in a breath, trying to stay patient.

“I’ll sing you a song,” I said.

I picked her up, and her hand settled against my neck. Her fingers were wet from sucking her thumb. I walked upstairs and helped her climb into her low bed—we just transitioned her from the crib this spring, the bed a hand-me-down from Danielle—and I sang her lullabies. She always asks for *abcb*—the ABC song—and what she calls “ring”: *And if that mocking bird don’t sing, poppa’s gonna buy you a big fat ring, and if that big fat ring don’t shine...* Her eyes were open, but she looked tired. She was rubbing her earlobe, a sure sign.

“Stay in bed,” I whispered.

I turned on the turtle light she loves, which projects tiny stars onto the ceiling. The room was dim and glowing when I walked out. I half wished I could stay in there and nap, too. I closed the door behind me and went back downstairs, knowing it wasn’t over.

She sang to herself for awhile. I listened on the monitor. She sang *abcbeefghi mnolp*. And then *You are my sunshine*, with half the right words. I smiled, eating strawberries at the table and staring at the stack of letters from bill collectors and our mortgage company. These were the envelopes I hadn’t opened, and they haunted me, sealed tight and foreboding, spelling more problems for our family. Would New Mexico solve it? What on earth would we do there?

Sleep now, baby, sleep, I thought. I tried to will her into it as if there’s some magic connection between us.

Five minutes later, I heard the thud of her feet landing on the floor, and the bedroom door creaking open, and her feet on the stairs. Even though I knew it was

coming, I felt fed up. No one told me how godawful repetitive parenting would be. It's the same thing, every day. Danielle keeps telling me that it's this age, she'll grow out of the rebellions. But to tell the truth, I didn't love the infant days, either, with the repetition of changing diapers, feeding, soothing, walking around and around and around the living room while she wailed or fussed. I felt like a bad mother, to resent any of it. I still do. I loved her. I've always loved her. And there would come moments when she'd do something sweet and adorable that would melt me again, and make me fall in love with her, and make me forget all of the frustration. But the boredom—there's a lot of boredom. I was glad to get the teaching job a year ago, for that reason—to be out of the house, with adults, doing things that have a beginning and an end. Even grading papers, at first, was a delightful task, because they would be complete when I was through the stack, and I would hand them back, and *that* was done; it was so satisfying.

I took a deep breath.

“Okay, Manda,” I said. “Back to bed.”

This time, I held her hand, walked upstairs, put her in bed, kissed her head, and said, “Stay in bed, Amanda, okay? Stay in bed and when you wake up, we'll take Simon for a walk.”

“To the field?”

She loves the field beyond Jeannie's house, where, in the summertime, wildflowers bloom and we see butterflies. Now, the grass is getting tall, and she runs through it with Simon, racing.

“Yes,” I said. “We can go to the field. But you have to sleep now. Close your eyes.”

Obedient, and tired enough at last, she closed her eyes. Her thumb was in her mouth, her other hand holding her earlobe. My heart went soft for her again, little bird, my frustration gone.

She’s asleep. I’m back at the kitchen table in this quiet house. I look down at Simon, stretched on the kitchen floor, and he senses me looking, opens his eyes, thumps his tail twice, watches me. Is it time to go do something?

“Not yet, buddy.”

He closes his eyes again and drifts back to sleep. Barefoot, feet crossed, I eat more strawberries one by one from the bowl on the table. I pull off the stems and leave them in a pile on the envelopes, where they stain the white paper with spreading pink splotches. The bills stare up at me. *Open us, open us, you’d better know how bad it is.*

Instead, I think about New Mexico. Go to the laptop that Gerald left in the living room, and search for pictures of New Mexico online. There are ancient pueblos, square with tiny rectangular openings for windows, and sprouting sage green grasses in clusters across a flat brown landscape. Whitish tent rocks look like a fairytale castle with pointed roofs. Shiprock rises up from the land in rich red color, like a sail on the horizon. Stella fits there, doing yoga and making her ceramics. Us? Our little family, out in this hot red land? An image of myself flashes up, lying out in the middle of the desert with my arms stretched out, the sun baking all the tension out of my body, it feels good. But—no. Then I stand up and I’m abandoned out there, alone, and my

body isn't cleansed but scorched, I'm dehydrated, probably dying alone in the flat land—

When the phone rings, my heart catches.

Tony?

I go to the kitchen and pull the phone from the wall.

“Mrs. Roe?”

I hear, in the background, the chatter of other callers, the professional tone in their voices. It's a call center. I know who this is. Shit. The bank.

“Yes,” I say. There's a groan in my voice. I try to restrain it. These poor people, having to make dreadful calls like this all day. Be nice, I tell myself.

“Mrs. Roe, this is my second call. It's now June twenty-eighth. You are three weeks behind on your June payment, and nearly three months behind total. Are you able to make a payment today?”

I get paid on Friday. Tomorrow. Four hundred twenty-two dollars in the bank right now. With my school pay and the orchard next week, six hundred seventy-five dollars more, with Gerald's pay on July 2, thirteen hundred more. He gets thirteen hundred, twice a month; that's with cuts taken out for taxes, social security, 401k, and Amanda's college fund. All of my salary goes to medical bills, which I pay bit by bit. Little chips at the mountain of debt. Danielle keeps telling me I should consolidate, that I should go and talk to her friend Derrick the accountant. I haven't done it yet, because that would mean confessing to all we owe. Losing hope of keeping Mary at the home in Bolton. Which costs us three hundred a month. Medicaid will cover four hundred. Car insurance? Two hundred. Groceries: one-fifty, now that we have

vegetables in the garden again—kale, lettuce, and the tomatoes will come soon. I bought lentils in bulk at the health food coop last March. We can eat those this month.

“I can pay four hundred,” I say. “If you put it through tomorrow.”

“Four hundred dollars?”

“Yes.”

It isn’t enough. It isn’t enough. Nothing is ever enough.

“I can schedule that for tomorrow. Will that be with debit or check?”

Her voice is nasal, level, non-judgmental. Does *she* have trouble paying her mortgage? Is she in these same straits? Was she, at some point? Can she relate?

“Check,” I say. “Hold on. Let me go get it.”

I go upstairs, to the blue desk, and roll back the top. The checkbook is in one of the cubbies that’s meant for pens and stationary and pleasant things. Not the burdens of an over-burdened house. It crosses my mind—this desk may be valuable. I should see.

I run back downstairs.

“You’re still there?” Catching my breath.

“I’m here,” she says. “You’ll need to pay the remaining four hundred by next Friday, to avoid further action. Can you do that?”

My stomach drops, the marble running from my throat to my low belly, like that game Amanda loves at the pediatrician’s office, a marble on a wire maze.

Weeeee-BOOM! She always says when it lands on its wooden platform.

“Yes,” I say. It’s just one more small lie, after all. What else could I say?

When I go up to get Amanda, I find that she's smeared poop all over her bedroom walls. She stands on her bed, wailing. There's brown poop smeared in palm-prints and fingerprints like a horrible rainbow arched over her bed, and more on the rug, in little brown clots, and more on the door jam. The smell is overwhelming. My stomach lurches.

"Moookmmmaaa," she cries. She holds her brown-smeared hands out to me, her pajamas down at her ankles. Her diaper's undone in the middle of her bed. The shades are drawn, and the room is dim. Her turtle spins stars onto the ceiling and across the shit-smeared wall.

"Amanda."

I'm stunned. What do I say?

"Amanda, why did you do this?" As if she could answer.

"Up," her hands reaching for me. "Momma, up!"

She screams louder, gasping between wails. She's been at this for awhile. How did I not hear her?

Simon pushes into the bedroom from behind me, and runs to the rug. He eats the poop on the floor, licking the rug.

Oh, god.

I'm living a domestic nightmare.

"Fuck," I say.

The smell is overwhelming. I turn my head away, into the hallway, and take a deep breath. Okay, I think, here we go. I turn back and go to Amanda and pick her up. I holler at Simon.

“Get out!” I say. I grab his collar, and Amanda slides to my hip, sideways, her head at my knees. “Simon, get *out!*”

I pull him towards the door with one hand, and carry Amanda, sideways, to the bathroom with the other. I yank her bedroom door shut behind me. I’ll deal with that second. I put her into the dry tub and her wails subside. She reaches for the rubber duckie she loves, and the plastic toys that are scattered on the floor.

“Hold on,” I say.

I pull her PJ shirt over her head. It’s lavender, and now speckled and smeared with her poop.

“Duckie!” she hollers. She grabs the duckie and smiles.

The shirt is covered in shit. I hold it up to assess it, then throw it to one side of the tub.

“I guess it was too small, anyway,” I say.

“Too small,” she says. “*Fuck.*”

She drops the duckie, now spotted brown, too, and presses her hands together and smears the poop in her palms, watching how her hands move with it.

“What did you say?”

She looks up at me and laughs. “Poopies!” she says, and presses her hands together again.

I hold her hands still.

“Little bird, please, stop. Don’t say the word Mommy said, okay? That was a bad word.”

My voice is short. I want to be one of those zen people, like Stella claims to be, unbothered even by a shit-covered child and a three-months-overdue mortgage. I pull Amanda's hands apart and start the water. It rushes out with a roar. I splash her hands with it and rub the poop off.

She cries. "Cold! Too cold!" She lifts her feet as if the water's burning her skin. She slips a little on her PJ pant legs and reaches for me, hanging onto my arm, smearing me.

"It'll be fine. It's warming up."

I twist the handle to warm, and hold my hand underneath to wait for it to change. Cold. Cold. Cold. My fingers begin to feel numb. Amanda's still holding onto my arm and crouching in the water, her pants getting soaked up to the knees. Her chest is bare. She splashes her hands in the water and laughs.

"Momma, I smell poopies!" she says.

She looks up at me, proud. She laughs and touches the tip of my nose with her finger.

"Poopies, Momma!"

I stare at her, refusing to react.

Cold, cold, cold. Why isn't it warming up?

"Momma, you smell poopies?"

She wraps her arms around my neck and squeezes, laughing. I smell her hands against my skin, near my face. Oh.

But there's something in the laughter, and feeling her against me even though she stinks of the poop she's smeared across the house. I fall for it. I laugh with her. I squeeze her back.

"Amanda," I say. "This is not my day."

She pulls away and kneels down in the water.

"Too cold!" she says, but she doesn't stand up again.

And then, one hand still under the water, I think—oh. Oh, yes. Oh, shit. *Shit*. The oil tank is out. I didn't pay the oil company. The realization stings. How could I have forgotten two bills? I should have called and negotiated. They'd have given me extensions if I'd just called ahead of time. Now, we'll have to pay extra to get our account reinstated and up to date.

I lean back and put my forehead against the cool lip of the tub. Amanda keeps splashing. I stare down at my knees. At the old blue tiles that we got free from the second-hand construction place in Hudson, when we redid the bathroom two years ago. The tiles are sky blue, an inch in diameter, set in grout that Gerald laid down. We both laid out the tiles, one by one, in a grid from the tub to the door. We laughed through most of it, counting together, racing each other to see who could set the most tiles in ten minutes. I touch one of the tiles with my numb fingers, and it's cool and wet. Amanda's humming *abcb* and splashing. I sigh, heavy, and sit up straight, hands on my legs. The water from my wet hand soaks through to my thighs.

"I hate to break it to you, baby, but I think this is as good as it gets."

She's going to scream the whole way through, but I know I have to give her an ice cold bath now. I shake my head, and promise her hot chocolate and candy after, if

she'll just endure this. I turn on the shower head and the frigid water rushes over her head, shoulders, little belly. I pull off her pants and throw them to one side with the shirt, now in the drift of water to the drain, soaked.

“Too cold, Momma! Too cold! No, NO!”

I am a horrible mother, the world's worst.

“Please, sweetie?” I say. “Just another minute.”

Maybe a sponge bath would work. Maybe we should go to Jeannie's and ask to use her tub. But—to ask to use her tub to wash shit off of my daughter? I can't do it. Jeannie will tell everyone. She'll give me mothering advice, all summer long, at every cookout and gathering. Amanda's almost clean, anyway. Just some chunks in her hair. I rub her head.

Amanda screams and squeezes my arms with her hands, digging in her nails. I squeeze baby shampoo over her body, into her hair, scrub fast with both hands, and let the water rinse her clean, rubbing my hands over her hair and pushing the water back from her eyes.

She hates the shower. And now, a frigid-cold shower? This is her misery. She wails and wails. I run a washcloth over her belly and back, wash her behind, run the cloth down her knees and calves. And she's clean. The water runs off clear now, the brown swirling and disappearing into the drain. I feel it lift off like a weight relieved. Gone, okay, one task down. Now just the bedroom, and cleaning up this bathroom later.

I look up at my poor, freezing daughter, victim of her mother's mistakes. She holds her arms in against her belly and shivers. Her shoulders are red, her lips purplish-blue. Her hair, curled strands, drips onto her shoulders.

"I'm cold, Momma." Her voice is soft now. She's given up crying and just wants my help.

"Okay," I say. "I know. All done."

I crank the water off; it squeals. This faucet is temperamental; we've replaced the valve three times. I grab a towel and wrap her up in it, rubbing her shoulders, arms, back and belly, legs.

"Let's turn on the blow dryer in my room, okay?" I say.

She nods and waits for me to lift her up. I carry her, wrapped in the towel, into my room, and put her on the bed.

"Hold on!" I say.

I jump into our bathroom, take the blow dryer from the counter, and run back into the bedroom. I plug it in, move back in front of her, and blow the hot air onto her from a few feet away.

"Does that feel good?" I say.

She's on her side, cocooned in the green towel. She nods and closes her eyes to the warm air. Her hair makes a wet gray halo on the white quilt. I move in closer and run my fingers through her hair with one hand, moving the dryer back and forth with the other.

"Good job, Little Bird, good job. I know, it was so cold. You did a good job."

A minute or so later, her baby-fine hair is dry and she's stopped shivering. I pull her out of the wet towel and tuck her in under my covers, pressing the quilt close around her shoulders. I get in under the covers, facing her, and wrap my arms around her until she's warm again. She tucks her head against my chest.

"Better?" I say.

I feel her nod. I pull back to see her face.

"You sing me a song?" she says.

"Hush, little baby, don't say a word," I begin. I sing the whole song, and at some point, I

drift off. I wake to her patting my face softly with the palms of her hands.

"Momma," she whispers. "Time to wake up, Momma."

I open my eyes and she looks back at me and smiles.

"Hot chocolate and candy?" she says.

I smile. "Yes," I say. I lean forward and kiss her nose. "Love you, little bird. My crazy monkey."

She looks at me, pauses, and then makes her mouth into an oval and opens her eyes wide. "Oh oh oh oh!" she calls, her best monkey impression. We do this when we read her book about the zoo, and all the animals. She stops and waits for me to laugh. I do.

"Very good," I say.

And I remember Mrs. McCrae, who takes care of Amanda now and was our neighbor when we were young. She told me and my mother a story one afternoon, a story about love and secrets and a monkey call.

* * *

MRS. McCRAE'S HALF-SMILE

Mrs. McCrae down the street has a face that droops, just one side. Half her smile works, and the other half just sits there, looking dead. One droopy green eye. One droopy cheek. One half of her chin falling away into her neck. We are not allowed to stare. Don't, says Mom, catching me at tuna-sandwich-lunch. She pinches my shoulder because we have Talked About This and I Should Know Better. Topics of our conversations.

Mrs. McCrae can still laugh. She does it loudly, opens half her mouth as wide as it will go, one eye crinkling up like eyes do when you are happy, one cheek rising, one crease on one side of her forehead. The other side, her left side, it is still, not a hint of movement. Her eyes are a pretty color green—something like a leaf with the sun shining through, lighter shades at the edges. I say that to her, and Mom gives me a look like I did something nice. Her own half-smile, both sides turning up so slightly you can only notice if you're waiting for it.

Mrs. McCrae's daughter's names are Roxanne and Michelle, which Mom and Dad say are silly names for Irish girls. Michelle is in eighth grade and Roxanne is two years older than her, a high schooler. She rushes home while we are nibbling on sandwiches, a breeze through the door—flash of denim and red—she tosses a book bag (high schoolers don't use backpacks) onto the floor and runs upstairs with a loud

thudding sound and then back down again, bump bump bump, and Mrs. McCrae says, “Roxie, aren’t you going to say hi?” She stops short at the doorway, leans against the white woodwork with her hairspray and her makeup and her red painted fingernails and says, “Hi Junie Hi Beth,” and then out the door again. We’re not allowed to use grown-ups’ first names. Mom says, “See you, Roxie.” When Mrs. McCrae apologizes, Mom waves her hand in the air, swish-swash, no big deal, teenagers. *Teenagers* is a way of excusing lots of things: running in and out of the house and throwing three-year-old kind of temper tantrums over borrowing the car and having bad accidents because you drive too fast. Dad reads the police blotter each week and then turns the page, sighing, going, *Teenagers*, like they’re the only bad ones in this town.

What about Mr. Swallow who drinks so much he stinks and then knocks on Ms. Deeanne’s door every Friday night until she calls Harvey the policeman to bring him away? What about the Pilgrims on the other side of Leeway bridge, with their pigs that stink to the heavens in summer , or Shane and Leonard with their yard full of old metal things, rusting into the ground? Don’t talk to them, Dad says, If you’re ever caught walking by alone. What about Mr. Talltree who left Mrs. Talltree last year and made her so sad she can’t even laugh anymore?

Mary is almost a teenager now. Mom and Dad say it like, *uh-oh, here we go.*

I look at the pictures on the piano. I have them memorized: Roxanne on Mr. McCrae’s shoulders when she was a toddler in a pink sweater and Michelle in her high school graduation picture and Roxanne and Michelle on the beach somewhere hot and sunny when they were small and Michelle in braces and Mr. and Mrs. McCrae with their arms around each other at their wedding. Her hair is brown and spun into a twist

at the back of her head. His hair is thick and dark and wavy, so long it covers his ears. He wears round tortoiseshell glasses and has a rose in his lapel. She wears a veil that hangs in ripples down her back. They are like different people.

I look at everything while Mom and Mrs. McCrae talk, at the heavy velvet curtains on the windows and thick Oriental rugs with patterns of deer and turtles and flowers, and the square patterns carved into the woodworking, and the shiny new wood floors that squeak if your shoes are wet.

“Tell Mrs. McCrae about your project, Junie,” says Mom.

“I’m raising a frog,” I say.

“Really?” says Mrs. McCrae. “What kind?”

“I don’t know yet. I get it on Wednesday.”

“Come on, Junie,” says Mom, “explain.”

I talk about raising a frog from an egg. They send it in the mail with a little plastic tank, and by the time it gets to your door, they say, it’s unfrozen and hatched and you have a tadpole. And then you watch it grow into a frog. I am going to study the stages and report on it for my science experiment this year. Rob says my project is for babies, but Mrs. Roe, the science teacher, says my project is a biological study of life cycles, and that I am going to be very technical about it all, timing each stage, comparing it to other frog stages, looking at the organs, studying its little frog body, its little frog world. These frogs are see-through so you can watch all their organs working, watch their little froggie hearts beating. Gerald’s making a pulley system thing, who knows, something with a golf ball, very technological, he says, a word he got from his dad.

“She’ll be in the science fair with three other sixth graders,” says Mom. Mom holds her tea cup, blowing off the steam. She is beaming at me, proud.

I feel myself turn red.

“That’s great, Junie,” she says, and her r’s roll so they almost sound like l’s. *Gleat*. then she tells me about how she always wanted to be like Jane Goodall and study chimps in the jungle, *Gorillas in the Mist*, she says, and then she says, “Have you ever heard monkeys call to each other? Do you know that they can speak?”

I shake my head. “No,” I say.

Before we know it, Mrs. McCrae opens her mouth wide as it goes and is going, Ooh, ooh, ah ah ah, louder and louder like she’s screaming for help, so loud I’m almost afraid someone’s going to come running thinking she’s hurt, thinking me or Mom hit her over the head with a teacup. But we are a mile up from the street and no one could hear us here in all these trees. She keeps going, louder and louder, AH AH AH AH! And she doesn’t stop. Mom and I don’t look at each other. Don’t breathe. We are shocked. And then, when she keeps going, we are entranced. All this sound from Mrs. McCrae, who laughs loud but talks in an everyday voice, up and down, lilting. Mrs. McCrae with her smiles and her patient questions and her rose-painted china teacups brought out on matching china trays, roses tumbling all over their shiny china sides.

I stare up at her face with its one eye squeezed shut and the other only half-shut and one side of her mouth pushing upward, pushing out all that sound, filling the house with this chimp call. Ah AH AH! The sound bounces off the walls, rises to the ceiling and falls back down again, slips into every crevice of the room, of our ears,

until it is all we know. Ah ah ah! This loud chimp call in the McCrae's fancy house, singing over the Oriental rugs and jamming up against the piano and tumbling all over, wild.

And then, she stops. Nothing in the house moves. It is silent. And so still we can feel each other breathing. We don't know what has happened here. Mom's cup is still up by her chin. The steam rises up before her face, twirling slowly into the air. She hasn't taken a sip.

Mrs. McCrae sits there heaving, catching her breath. "Woo," she says, "it's been awhile since I did that." She laughs. "Back in college, my boyfriend Anthony and I would do that across campus, calling to each other like chimps do in the wild."

And there is Mrs. McCrae in some other life: she looks just like she does in her wedding picture, the only other version of her there is: same dark hair spun back, same white dress shimmering in the picture, but instead of Mr. McCrae staring back at her, she has a faceless boyfriend waiting somewhere in the shadows far, far away and she calls to him with her hands at her mouth in her white dress, waiting for his answer, her voice carrying across an empty campus – which is a building just like Alcott School, flat and long and made of brick, with Elm trees all around it – and there is no one else around. It is nighttime. It is quiet. It is Mrs. McCrae in her other life, a different person, not transfixed like she is here in her brown wool sweater tied snug at the waist. No. She is wild. Her face is full and round, and both sides work and she laughs hard and long like she does now, but both sides of her lips turn up and she is forgetting everything that will happen later – kids and errands and work and a husband – because she is this other Mrs. McCrae, and she is silly and breathless and waiting for her

boyfriend Anthony to walk to her from the other side of the darkness, emerging from between the trees like a memory, like something she isn't supposed to be doing.

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FREEZING

In the morning, Gerald comes out of the bathroom dripping, no towel. He shouts, so I wake up: "Junie! Junie! That goddamn shower is freezing!"

I roll over to face him, turning my back to the sunrise coming in through the windows, an orange-pink sky, dramatic today. He's standing there naked, his body pale with cold, shampoo still frothed in his hair.

"The water," I say. "I know. They forgot to fill our oil tank."

He's shivering. The shampoo bubbles drip to his shoulders. He turns back to the bathroom to get a towel. I watch his wide back, his small, round bottom. Baseball player body.

"The oil company *forgot?*"

He comes back out, towel around his shoulders. His belly hangs, a curved fold just above his penis, which is wrinkled and limp between his still-strong thighs.

"I think so," I say. Does he buy this? Is it possible? I'm still half asleep, but my heart is racing. I can't tell him that I forgot the oil bill, that we just can't pay it *and* the mortgage.

"Did you call them?"

"I will. Today. As soon as they open."

He nods, and pulls the towel down around his waist. He looks at me, wondering something.

“What?” I say.

He shakes his head, turns and goes back into the bathroom.

“It’s just strange,” he says.

He closes the door. I hear the sink faucet running. He’s rinsing his hair in the sink. He makes little grunting sounds as he does it, enduring the chill: *Oh, uh, oh, god*, and then the faucet squeaks off, and there’s the sound of the towel rubbing over his body.

I roll back to the window to watch the sunrise. I can’t fall back asleep now. My heart’s still racing. I haven’t lied to Gerald before. Does he know it’s a lie? What does it mean that I’ve deceived him, for the first time? The sun comes up hot orange behind the tree branches in the window. I’ll get up as soon as he goes. I’ll go see Mary, and then humble myself to Danielle back at the orchard.

*

SPASTICITY: *Damage to areas of the brain that control movement may result in uncontrollable muscle spasms. These changes can interfere with a person's ability to walk and take care of himself or herself. Treatments include:*

- *Oral medication or medication administered through the feeding tube.*
- *Intrathecal medication (medicine administered directly into the spinal fluid through an implanted pump).*
- *Injection into the affected muscle of chemical blockers such as phenol or botulinum toxin.*

• *Surgery.*

*

SPEAK, MARY

At the hospital, it's early morning, before I head for the orchard. I dropped off Amanda, and instead of going there, I came here first. Drawn back to say hello, to remind her that I'm paying attention to her, that I'm waiting. If she only knows we're waiting, she'll come back.

I read her the news from the Bolton Commoner.

"There's been a string of thefts," I say. "Petty theft, at first. They don't know who, but they suspect kids—well, Michael the cop said they suspect kids, but Mr. Heinz is pointing his fingers at the orchard crew. He says now that they have bikes, they can go anywhere, anytime, and it could have been them. He's such a bastard. Now some of the new people are agreeing with him. It was a madhouse at the meeting the other night.

"One of the kids they suspect is Willow's nephew. Mr. Perkins told me at the Country Store this week. But then yesterday, someone broke into the dentist's office and stole a tank of laughing gas. They could die from that stuff."

I watch her to see if she registers this. Does she remember? Is she thinking about what she did? All those little pills in her handbag? I stare at her. Her eyes flicker back and forth. She blinks. She makes a small moaning sound, which usually means she's tired and will fall asleep any second. I keep talking anyway.

“Remember Willow Smalls? And her older sister Nuna, who had one boy? Nuna got pregnant one night with her boyfriend when she was twenty-five years old, and Donald lost it. Was so angry at that guy, saying how could you take advantage of someone like her? Meaning someone with Downs Syndrome. But the guy had a disability, too, some kind of cognitive problem that just wasn’t as visible as Nuna’s diagnosis. They met at her group work meetings. Anyway, they think it’s Nuna’s boy, Henry Smalls, because he lives with Willow now. Imagine. Living with Willow and those three baby girls? I’d become a delinquent, too. They’re stealing hub caps and car radios and walking into open houses and taking silver and jewelry. People have started locking their doors. That’s a shame. To have to lock our doors now.”

Of course she remembers Willow Smalls, Dr. Smalls’ daughter. She was my friend, and we were silly together, and then she changed and became Mary’s friend. Black eyeliner in the eighth grade and sneaking out not just to skinnydip but to drink and smoke pot and then do more, and more, and different things, drugs and boys, she and Tony that week after we made out in the woods, his arm over her shoulders, and the rumors after Willow ran away, of meth or cocaine—Mary would never tell me all of their lives out at night. She’d sneak back in, and I’d be grateful she was home, and I didn’t push—not then, not ever. *G’night*, I’d say across the room, and she’d whisper back, *Night*, and sometimes I smelled cigarette smoke and sometimes her voice slurred, but I never said anything about that. I didn’t know what it meant; I was too young to know. Back then, I’d never have connected those things with drinking, or drugs.

Mary stares up, that one big scar slashes across her face, the multiple pock marks that the glass made. It's so hard to look at her sometimes, to remember who she was versus who she is. She wears blue cotton pants and a white polo shirt. Sometimes Amelia makes her look too preppy. Mary would never wear a polo shirt with the collar turned up like that. I lean over and turn it down. Pat its edges. Say, "Good." Let my hand rest on her shoulder so that I can feel her breathe.

Sometimes, I keep my hands on her the whole time I am here, so that she feels my touch, so that she knows I'm still waiting. We are all still waiting. For her to come back. We have not left.

"Yes," she says. It's a slurred sound, an almost-word, *yesh*, but I know it's a word. She spoke!

"Yes," I say. "Yes!" I almost cry, my heart racing.

She closes her eyes.

"Reviendre," I say. To return. It comes to me like some lost language from another world, another life I knew once. A long time ago. Rising up through the dark water and emerging all white and shedding streams, then sliding off my tongue into this air. Slipping into the world as a word. A round soft word. She's still here. I rush out to tell Dr. Smalls.

A CHANGE

When I dropped Amanda at Mrs. McCrae's, she said *we're making cookies today!* and she took Amanda's hand and walked her into the house, filling me with gratitude, for

the time Mrs. McCrae gives me and for the sweetness between them. Then, I came back to the orchard to face Danielle.

She's in the wine gazebo, stacking bottles in the wooden shelves that line the built-in benches along each wall. It's an octagon, with shelves of wine above each of the four windows, too, and stacked along every other wall. Raspberry, peach, plum, and apple wines—Gravenstein is pure apple, and there's an apple-cranberry wine, too. These last few years, we've had fruit wines, but starting next year, we'll have grapes, too. Danielle and Terence planted a vineyard up behind the orchard four years ago, and it's now bearing enough grapes to harvest. They'll supplement with bought grapes, and increase apple wine production with more apples from Bolton Orchards.

It's a cooperative, she always says, how our farms and orchards work together.

She's sweaty in the tasting room. Romero is installing the window air conditioner unit in one of the windows now, nailing a support to the outside and then screwing through the metal strips into the wood. He's not using the drill, but a hand screwdriver. Why not use the power drill? I want to tell him, but we're in the middle of this argument now. I want to apologize, but not with Romero within earshot. Danielle doesn't like to argue in front of her employees, because it's awkward for them.

I start with the good news. "Mary said 'yes' this morning, Dan."

"She did?"

She turns to look at me, suspicious, her head turned to one side while she watches me.

“It sounds like ‘yesh,’ but it was definitely ‘yes.’ She said it right after I said it.”

I’m waiting for her to smile. This is good news! Why isn’t she more excited? Dr. Smalls wasn’t, either. He warned me to proceed with caution. We’ve seen these vacillations before, he said.

“She said a word! It’s been months since she spoke. This is great news! Now we won’t have to move her. She can stay at the rehab center, and get better.”

Danielle shakes her head.

“Maybe,” she says.

“Why isn’t everyone celebrating with me? Dr. Smalls said to *temper my enthusiasm*,” I say, sarcasm in his phrase.

“We don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“I’m not getting hurt. I’m helping Mary.”

I feel indignant, the rush of irritation in my throat, closing. Breath shorter. Danielle has lost her faith in Mary, too?

“Hey,” she says. She doesn’t look up. “What do you think, is eighty bottles of raspberry going to be enough for the season?”

She turns the bottle in her hand, studying it. Ella Newhouse made the labels for her, bright fruit with the farm in the background, sheep grazing (there aren’t any sheep, but she liked the look of it). Ella is from one of only two black families who have lived here forever—well, since the lime quarry days, at least—but now, with the newcomers, the town is getting more diverse. There’s that, at least, one benefit, forcing Bolton to confront its heterogeneity, to talk about these things that matter. At

the last PTA meeting before school let out, parents argued that we need to hire more teachers of color in the public schools. They never talk about the migrant workers who come to the orchards and farms only in the spring, summer, and fall. Most of those families come, stay eight or ten to a two bedroom house, and then go after a few weeks. Where? Further south, where the fruit needs gathering later in the season, or north, for the summer, to the Maine orchards, which fruit later in the summer.

“Only if you don’t use it for the weddings,” I say. “Last year, we ran out.”

“I thought we ran out of plum last year?” She looks up, her eyebrows pressed together. Sweat drips down the side of her face. Her skin is flushed and freckled. She’s taken on too much this year with the vineyard. She’s going to have to hire another manager, in addition to Manuel, if she wants to keep growing. She and Terence talk about this all the time; the question is when to do it. They need to be financially stable enough to support someone else, and on the brink of expansion, but before they get entirely overwhelmed and lose ground. They need someone who specializes in wine.

“This good?” says Romero from outside. He touches the unit on its support.

Danielle jumps up to inspect it. She nudges it. It holds.

“Perfect,” she says. “Thanks.”

He finishes screwing in the bolts that will hold it from the outside, then comes in to screw it into the window and frame. When he turns it on, the air blows on me and Danielle, and she hollers, “Woooooo! Now *that’s* what I’m talking about!”

We laugh. He tucks the screwdriver into his back pocket, so that the end of the words *McNally Orchards* are visible. Danielle labels all her tools.

As Romero wanders off, the rest of the Jamaican crew walks by talking about the apples, coming soon. Romero jogs to catch up with Omar and the old crew up front, the five new guys in back. There's still a rift between them, as if the new guys are stealing time from the old guys. Danielle doesn't know how to fix it. And then the teenagers go by, joking and razzing each other. *Nuh-uh. Swear to god. Shit!*

"Watch that language!" Danielle leans out the door. "We have customers now. No swearing!"

"Sorry, Mrs. M," says Bruce, slouching, and leads the crew away. They head for the stairs into the orchard, to help bag the buckets of cherries and strawberries waiting for them.

I kneel on the floor and start unpacking bottles, slipping them into their perfectly-sized cubbies along the floor. Six bottles up, to the benches, apple, plum, raspberry, semi-sweet blueberry, strawberry rhubarb.

"Will you have the new tasting room in by next year, you think?" I say. I'm waiting to apologize, easing into it with small talk.

"Will we? I don't know." She pulls the door shut and goes to stand in front of the air conditioner. "Oh my god, that feels good. This summer is starting off too hot for the fruit. And my kale is wilting."

Peach, six bottles. Dry blueberry, six bottles. I'm nearly to the other window.

"Danielle, I'm sorry about not coming in yesterday," I say.

"Yeah, that wasn't great."

"I know. I'm sorry. It's all this stuff about moving, and you and Gerald talking about it without me."

“We weren’t talking without you. He and Terence talked about it over beers the other night, and I think it’s a good idea. That’s it.”

I nod. I try to agree with her, coaxing myself into accepting that they’re just trying to help.

“I think you’re martyring yourself, Junie. You’re there every single day. You’ve given up everything for her. You’re having money trouble, with Gerald’s job on the rocks. It’s too much. Everyone’s backed off but you. That’s the damned truth.”

“The *damned* truth? Dramatic,” I say. My voice is all sarcasm, but I don’t rein it in. Martyring myself? Is she kidding? I slam a bottle into its cubby.

“Hey,” she says. “It’s not the bottle’s fault.”

I leave the last few in the box and stand.

“I’m doing what I have to. Right? You really think it’s martyrdom? You don’t think it’s all worth it?”

She softens. Her head tilts to one side. Her voice takes the tone it takes when she’s telling Alice that she can’t do something she very much wants to do—riding one of the goats (goats don’t like to be ridden), or riding her bike in the road (people drive too fast down Waddaquadock Road), or going to work with Terence (he has to meet with clients all day, and it won’t be any fun for you).

“No one has the same faith that Mary’s coming back as you, June. Not even Dr. Smalls. He’s said you should move her. Maybe that’s what you should do. Maybe you should think about moving, too. Get out of here for awhile. *I* don’t want you to leave, but I’m worried about you. I want you to be happy. That’s what I want.”

I cross my arms, knowing that she's being honest—she does want me to be happy, she's a good friend, and always has been—but I can't accept what she's saying.

“Gerald still believes in her.”

“Does he?”

She looks at me, calm gaze, a look I can't read: Does he? Do I know, truly?

I veer away from that. I don't want to read her.

“You guys keep *pushing* me. You and Stella, and now Gerald. I can't give up on Mary. I know it seems bullheaded to everyone, but I *know* she's coming back.”

“It wasn't your fault she got into the accident. It was an accident. She was high.”

“I made her come.”

“It doesn't matter. You think you were selfish then, and that you can give and give and give to make up for it now, but it won't change anything. What did the ER doctors tell you? What were the levels in her blood?”

Someone walks by and knocks the gazebo. I glance out the window to see the back of a ladder moving horizontally, carried by someone to the shed.

“Tony says I should get in touch with Alan Ball. Remember him? The guy from Tufts. He knows something, maybe, he can help figure it out.”

“Tony says?”

Shit.

“We had lunch.”

I feel my face burning, and know it's going red red red. Shit. Caught.

“Lunch.”

“Yeah.”

Heart pounding.

“Okay. And what else?” Her tone is wary.

“What do you mean *what else?* That’s it. Lunch. He asked about what happened, and I told him, and he said maybe I should talk to Alan. Maybe Alan can explain what happened with Mary and what she was going through, you know? What was going on with her then, and how she got to this point.”

My voice is defensive, and I’m talking too fast. I breathe in and out through my nose, trying to calm myself. I can see that Danielle’s trying to swallow this, Tony advising me. Me and Tony talking intimately, about this.

“Tony’s helping you.”

Her voice is flat. She looks straight at me, right into my eyes, waiting for me to reveal something, or trying to understand this.

“Yeah, he’s helping. We’re old friends. So he’s helping.”

She nods, slowly. I don’t look away. I don’t want to make her think I can’t meet her gaze. Nothing is happening. Nothing has happened with Tony. I wouldn’t ever let anything happen.

“That’s it, Dan, friends. I would tell you—I would never do that, anyway.”

She raises her eyebrows. “You think you need to see Alan? Okay. So, go *see* Alan. Go do whatever you need to do. But you have to listen to Dr. Smalls. You have until the end of summer.”

“I know.”

“And don’t skip work without calling again. Don’t do that to me. It isn’t fair, leaving me to scramble for the day. It was surprisingly busy,” she says. “You can’t just *not* come because you’re upset. This is my business, our livelihood, your job.”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry. It was stupid. I just, I got, I don’t know—I hit a wall.” “Well, Jeannie keeps bothering me to hire her, and I’m tempted when you do things like that.”

Jeannie and Ed are our neighbors, the only other house on our street, with a scorched brown lawn, and two teenage boys. Ed lounges around the yard with a can of beer and his belly hanging out the bottom of his t-shirt—in the good days. Bad days, he’s shirtless. When he works in the yard, we can hear him cursing the shovel, or the roots he can’t unearth, or the lawnmower that needs gas. *Goddamn fucker*. Those kinds of words. He isn’t shy. Jeannie has always been anxious, and since she married Ed halfway through college, she’s been even more so. I can’t blame her. I couldn’t live with his cursing and furies. I don’t know why she doesn’t leave. Instead, she twists the hair at the nape of her neck, pulling it out in tufts and leaving a bare spot that she hides, always smoothing her hair down when she’s out in public to be sure no one can see, and she darts up to all the new, wealthy women in town, vying for acceptance.

“Jeannie? Come on, Danielle, she’s a mess.”

“Just don’t do it again, okay?”

“Yes. Okay. And you’ll back off of me?”

She squats down and turns a few bottles that I'd just shelved, so the labels are turned up. "Don't forget to show the labels," she says.

I ignore her micro-managing.

"I might," she says. She smirks. "Or maybe I won't. Maybe you need me to bother you." I give her a look, head cocked, eyebrows raised. My lips are tight.

She laughs. "Yeah, yeah, I'll *try*," she says. "You're right."

It irks me sometimes, her being my boss. She's doing this as a favor to us, of course, and

I love being in the orchard, but it complicates our friendship, too. I'm not just her friend but also someone who has to take her orders and corrections, who takes a paycheck from her, who has to perform at work and create some kind of line between friendship at work and friendship outside of work—a professional version of our relationship has to live here, and we put aside the thorny things that we would talk about outside of here. Or—we *do* talk about them here, of course, but in the down moments, and when we're busy, we ignore all that and simply work. Get things done.

"Good," I say. "Anyway, the other day? I got punished with a shitstorm.

Literally."

I tell her about Amanda's room, and she laughs harder now, her big chuckle pushing at the walls of this small, high-ceilinged room, and I laugh with her, finally able to see the humor in it. It was funny. It was disgustingly funny. The carpet is stained and the room still carries an odor that will probably take weeks to fade. But it was funny.

She turns and heads for the door. The heat from outside rushes in. Too much.

“Finish setting up in here for me? And then we need some strawberry rhubarb pies tomorrow. Can you do that? Seven, for the weekend?”

I nod. Thinking, now, that I should run home and call Alan Ball. Right now. Rush off and talk to him. Get it over with. Or better yet, first, I’d see Tony.

“See you at lunch,” she says, and smiles a real smile—I’m forgiven—and closes the door behind her.

I press down every impulse to run off and walk the woods with Tony, or go for a swim at the pond with Tony, or take a drive with Tony, and instead, I unpack the last few bottles, and then wipe down the tasting counter, relishing the cool air. I sit in front of it and let it blow back my hair, eyes closed, imagining that I’m on a sailboat in the Pacific, headed for a three week sail to Alaska. I’ll camp out along the shore, see bears, moose, coyotes. Fish for salmon and cook it over a campfire. We’ll make s’mores, after. Suddenly, Tony is there with me. The fire lights up his face, etching out his cheekbones, his lips. He pulls the stick out of the fire, pulls the marshmallow off between two graham crackers, melting the chocolate, and eats it in three bites, wolf-like. Licks the marshmallow off his sticky thumbs. *The better to see you, my dear.*

At seven o’clock, the daylight is waning, and I’ve locked up the barn doors. We’re done for today. I load two bags of apples—four pies to make—into the car, and hear a squealing of tires, then the brakes on gravel, rocks spinning up onto the metal of the car.

“Shit!” says a male voice, and I turn to see Bruce, at the other end of the driveway, loading a bike into the car’s trunk. The boys in the car cackle. The Winston twins, and old Jed’s great nephew Arnold.

“Where you taking that bike, Bruce?” I shout.

He turns to me, and I can see his surprise. He didn’t see me. He thought he was alone here.

“Hey, Mrs. Roe!” shout the Wintsons. Those little shits. They never do their homework, and got caught selling pot and vandalizing lockers last year.

“Hi, boys.”

Should I tell them that I know they’re the ones stealing? Making everything harder for the Jamaicans?

“Danielle said I could borrow the bike,” says Bruce. “She said it was fine.”

“Fine, then,” I say. “Be careful tonight.”

I’m too tired to pursue it. I have to get Amanda. I want to see Tony. I want to take a nap in the twilight, once I put Amanda to bed.

They pull out of the lot slowly, an exaggerated sloth, taillights red, until they round the bend in one seventeen, and then I hear the engine roar, and the tires squeal again, and one of those boys screams a holler of freedom and recklessness.

NEOLOGISM

Ferplentulux, Blenduloons, Jackinabass, Mockremptup. Words I recorded, Mary’s words. At the end of the first year, the feeding tube out, she would say these things, staring off. Or she would follow our movements, and we would turn our backs, and

this is what she'd say. A little notebook full of nonsense words, sits on the desk in the translating room. Vivenromplet, Clundop. Maybe part Latin, maybe part English, maybe part animal anatomy, who knows? These words just spilled out of her. But then she was transferred to the rehab hospital, and regressed, the feeding tube back in. It took another year to get her off of it. At the end of that second year, I kept waiting for her to speak. But, nothing. Until finally, the third year, in October, she started in with them again. Plentunter. Croondibble. Loonyoy. Only every few weeks, something new and strange. This winter, she has not said much, this spring, even less. But there is another little notebook there, in her bedside table, waiting, and now we will fill it again, with all of her words, starting with *yes*. There's a billowing inside me, a lifting up. My mother was right—good news was on its way.

ORCHARD

The next day is another party, this one hosted by the new women—so-and-so's engagement party. Jeannie is there, cloying. She wants to befriend all the new women in town. The new women wear polo sweaters and polo shirts and little white sneakers, and short white tennis skirts. This is the third party this week. I've made another batch of pies since the weekend, but this group just wanted fresh fruit—fruit salad, chicken salad, green salads with plenty of arugula. They love arugula—soccer mom crack, Danielle calls it.

When Gerald and I play tennis—when we have time for tennis, when we played two years ago—it was in grubby shorts, on Mr. Phipps' old land, the clay court that's still there and owned by the stable now. Which they let us use for free, because

Mr. Phipps insisted all the land be used by the people who live nearby. It was written into his will. Mr. Phipps didn't see these people coming.

They toss their hands and hold glasses of punch, and the old Bolton people stand in clusters together—except for Jeannie, who is right in the thick of those pastel polo sweaters.

The tent is stretched across the slate patio behind the old barn, and on the far side, a table with punch and hors d'oeuvres is manned by Lacey Walker, hired for the summer. One of the new people's daughters.

"Divine," she says, "Isn't it?" She spreads her arm wide, dramatic. She doesn't look at me. There's an edge to her now, when we talk. I try to laugh her out of it, to talk about other things. But she's onto me, and she's angry that I'm betraying—she *thinks* that I'm betraying—Gerald.

I nod. "I can smell them from here."

Danielle crosses her arms and surveys the scene, as if the women are the trees out back. Cherry orchard. Peach orchard. Which ones will bloom and which need more nurturing.

"They bring in the money, though," she says.

"Yeah, and they live in all the houses that ruined us."

Danielle sighs. "We don't have a choice anymore. We need them. We could buy half the town on what they spend on cars."

Danielle is good at making nice. For all her gruffness and her loud voice and her hearty life—hikes with Terence and the kids every Saturday in the off-season—she is good at this. She's a businesswoman. Slivers of lies she tells—*Aren't you*

looking nice today? Your tennis game is getting so strong. I saw Alexi playing soccer last weekend—what an athlete, and a sweetheart, too! Is that Jim's new Mercedes?

Ways to keep the orchard alive, ways to save Bolton's land. Danielle can know how to survive, to get what she needs.

And then Jeannie is upon us, laughing in her twitter, flashing her hands, saying, "A lovely afternoon, Junie, isn't it? My aren't you looking well, love your hair, where have you been these days, I never see you, never anymore, what are you up to these days? Lord, Junie, your color is wonderful, doesn't she look wonderful, Danielle?"

Jeannie pulls at the back of her hair. Once. Twice. Then catches herself and puts her hand down, holds both hands against her stomach. She laughs. It's her high, nervous laugh. She's changed her diction in the last year. *My, aren't you looking well.* As if she's in some movie version of her life, blueblood. She always wanted to be blueblood. Her father was a shoe salesman in Quincy.

I don't look at Danielle. I look at Jeannie. Then look away. At Lacey, spooning punch for Maggie Trollop, a newcomer.

"Really, you look incredible, Junie. What's your secret these days?"

I feel Danielle watching me. Feel my face flush red, up from my neck. All the way to my ears, the flood of it. The blood spreading.

Danielle turns back to Jeannie. "She does look good."

"What's your secret, Junie?"

"Working in the orchard," says Danielle. "All that fresh air."

She puts her hand against my back, and pushes me toward the punch and food.

Jeannie twitters again, that laugh.

“Thanks,” I say.

Danielle doesn't say anything. She leads me to the punch bowl, and says, “Give Junie a cup, will you, Lacey?” And then she walks into the crowd.

“Danielle,” I say.

She turns around, one eyebrow raised. I can tell she has no patience for me right now.

“What's going on?” I say.

“What do you *mean*? I have no idea *what you mean*,” she says. “If there were anything going on, *I'd* tell *you*, just like *you'd* tell *me*. Isn't that true?”

She cocks her head to the left.

Jeannie is watching us.

“Right,” I say.

“Thought so.”

She turns and walks into the crowd, and Jeannie scoops punch into my plastic cup.

“What's she talking about?” says Jeannie. “What's the secret?”

“There aren't any secrets here,” I say.

I sip the punch. Berry-something, with floating raspberries and ice.

“Let me see your new kitten later today, hunh, Jeannie?”

“Oh, he's gorgeous—all black with a white-tipped tail. Amanda will adore him. I just hope the coyotes don't get him.” She says coyotes without pronouncing the long “e” at the end, as if she's in an old Western movie. *Kie-oat*.

“Won’t he be inside for a few months?”

“Well. Fingers crossed.”

She crosses her fingers and holds up both hands.

“What’s his name?”

“We named him George Bush,” she says, “Ed’s hero,” and I wish that Danielle were beside me right now to laugh.

*

NEUROENDOCRINE DISORDERS: *A severe injury may damage deep parts of the brain responsible for such primitive functions as temperature regulation, hormone balance, and appetite. When a doctor suspects this may have happened, laboratory studies should be conducted to determine whether the condition is treatable. This is more likely to be the case if the damage is not to the brain itself but to the hormone-secreting glands inside it. For example, the pituitary gland, located at the base of the brain, releases hormones that control the rest of the endocrine system. Panhypopituitarism occurs when the pituitary or its outflow tract are damaged, impairing the production or release of these "master" hormones. It may be treated with hormone therapy. Near the pituitary is the hypothalamus, responsible for a range of normal functions.*

Injury to the hypothalamus can result in central dysautonomia (also called hypothalamic storming), involving problems with high body temperatures, fast heart rate and breathing, sweating, and increased muscle rigidity. The condition is usually resistant to hormone treatments, but it is also typically short-lived, resolving on its

own. Some clinicians may opt to treat it with medications including neuroleptics, dopamine agonists, dantrolene sodium, and morphine.

* * *

SECRET

Mrs. McCrae came over and cried to Mom. Sat down in our kitchen and put her head in her hands, her back an arch against the white wall. She wore an old blue sweater with holes around the neck and cuffs. She looked tired—her hair all wild around her head. She said, “Roxanne is in it.”

“Go upstairs,” said Mom, pointing to me. I was hiding behind the doorway but she saw my hand on the molding.

I ran upstairs and found Mary making a photo album in her room. “What does *in it* mean?” I said.

She looked up, cross-legged on her bed. Her hair hung down across one shoulder.

“I don’t know,” she said. “How’s it used?”

“Roxanne is *in it*. Mrs. McCrae’s downstairs.”

“Were you eavesdropping?”

“Maybe,” I said.

“It means she’s in trouble.”

“What kind?”

“I don’t know. Go eavesdrop some more and find out.”

“What are you making?” I walked over to her bed and saw the collage—all of her friends from eighth grade in little triangles and circles and squares, laughing faces pasted together across the page.

“Nice,” I said.

“One more week till high school,” she said.

“You’re gonna be great. Still the most popular. Everyone loves you.”

That night, we got a talk. Mom and Dad wanted to tell us some things we should know. What not to do with boys. And what if they do something we don’t like? And what if we’re uncomfortable? Things we can say. How to make them stop.

“Duh,” I said. “We already know all that.”

“Well, we wanted to make sure,” said Dad.

“Because of Roxanne?”

I looked at Mom. She was sitting next to Dad on the couch and she and Dad held their hands folded in front of them, both of them leaning forward, me and Mary in the big orange chair across from them. Stella was upstairs drawing. She was too little for this, said Dad, this is for the Big Girls. Mary rolled her eyes and said, Dad, we’re too old for *that*.

Mom looked over at Dad. Sidelong.

“No,” said Mom. “What did you hear about Roxanne?”

“Nothing. She’s in it. That’s all.”

“You’re not to repeat that,” said Mom. “Junie?” She looked at me with her eyebrows up. “Do you understand? Not to a soul.”

“Yes,” I said.

“Promise?”

“Yes,” I said.

And I did. I promised and I meant to keep it.

But the next day in school, there were Danielle and Becca, and Tony was off with The Circle, and I felt all alone. Becca was talking to Danielle about something, saying how they would this afternoon, how they’d meet up at three. They didn’t turn to invite me. Didn’t say a word. It was lunchtime. I took a bite of sloppy joe. I wanted to cry. But instead, I swallowed. I leaned in. The whole cafeteria was full of people and the smell of frying meat. We sat in rows at the metal tables with the little plastic stools attached.

Willow came over and sat with me; she’d just come to our school from Imago, a year after I switched in, and she wasn’t in trouble yet. No dark eyeliner, no torn-off black t-shirts, no drinking, no late nights out or skipped school days. She was still young. And I couldn’t help it—I couldn’t hold it in. It was something I needed that rose and itched and clawed at my throat—I fought it but I couldn’t stop, I *couldn’t*, and I said, “I know a secret, but you have to promise not to tell anyone else, okay?”

She turned to me ready to hear. I paused for a minute, savoring. Her waiting face. And then I told her what I heard my mother say about Roxanne, and she said maybe it’s that Roxanne is pregnant, Roxanne sells drugs, Roxanne smokes pot,

Roxanne did it with a guy, Roxanne hitch-hiked somewhere. She ran away. She stole money. She is in it in it in it.

I said, “No, I don’t think that’s how it is. I don’t think it’s anything so big.”

But Willow said, “Oh ho ho! And she walked away, right up to Becca, and then they both pulled Jessica Haggart aside, and I knew—I *knew* I’d started something big and terrible that was heading off without me now, already. Unstoppable and thoughtless and fierce.

* * *

SWIM

Willow Smalls, Dr. Smalls’ daughter, had long bleached-blond hair and a wild streak. She liked to lie, and she wasn’t a good friend. I knew it even then. For awhile, we were friends, but then so much changed in those few years. She and Mary were friends for awhile, when they drank together behind the high school and smoked pot sometimes (people said, I never saw). Then, Willow did something—I don’t know what—and Mary wouldn’t be her friend anymore.

Mary used to say I had to learn to stick up for myself against Willow, against anyone. She told me, “I won’t always be here for you, Junie. One day you’ll be in high school, and I’ll be far away at college. You have to practice being brave. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said.

I didn’t really believe that she’d ever leave me. I always relied on her being here.

DROWN

At the place where Mary stays, there is a man who drinks too much water. This can happen sometimes, the doctor says, the water problem. He doesn't know when he's had enough. He can't be left alone, because he will drink from the sink, mouth to faucet, incessantly. If he can't get to the sink, he will drink from the toilet. Lap it up like a dog.

His name is Chester, and he used to be an investment banker. He is sixty-two, and his wife comes in every Monday and Thursday and both days on the weekend. Tuesdays are his hardest days. Tuesdays, he pounds at the bathroom doors. He cries.

If no one is there to watch him in his room, he has to be restrained. Belts around his wrists. Not belts but some hospital version of them.

I go in and talk to Chester sometimes, when I am in need of a voice talking back. When I have read Mary the paper and sat with her awhile and stared out the window at the sun, the trees, the clouds. Whatever is out there that day. When I hear Chester cry down the hall, a lonely sad sound of a man who will never be the same as he was, I walk down the hall and I sit in the chair by his bed and we talk.

I go to Chester, and he says, "I'm thirsty. I'm so thirsty."

"I know," I say. "It's Tuesday. Marianne isn't coming today, is she?"

He shakes his head. He is almost bald now. He wears frameless glasses and a thick gold watch, which he bought for himself after his company, TIS, reached its twenty-fifth year. He founded it himself, in Boston, an office on Boylston Street. Now,

it is run by his brother, who Chester used to argue with all the time about running a good business. Every now and then, Chester will say, “Where is Victor? Where is Victor?” Over and over again, as if he knows Victor is in charge now, doing things he would not agree with. But there is no way he can know, say the doctors. He does not understand. He does not remember.

Marianne says what do they know, says Chester must sense something.

“I’m thirsty. Can you bring me some water?”

His hands are tied down to the edges of the bed, metal frame, his body big, still strong. He goes to the physical therapy room and spends two hours every day, lifting weights, strengthening his back. He has always had a weak back.

“Sorry,” I say. “I can’t. Do you want to hear a story?”

“No,” he says. “Just water.”

“I’m going to tell you a story,” I say. “It’s about a man and a woman who got married a long, long time ago, right here in Bolton.”

He stares at me, wanting only water. Not a story, a snippet from his own life (a fact he will not know), but simply: water.

A wire loose. A cord undone.

Here he sits, thinking water water water, and Marianne will come back on Thursday, she will come in and smile and tell him that she loves him. Her husband a different man.

She is dating again. I saw her two weeks ago at the Colonial Store building, at Becca’s salon. She was getting her hair done for a date with a man Victor knows, from Boston.

“It’s been four years,” she says. “I don’t know. What do you think?” she turned to me.

We have seen each other here for four years. Four years and Marianne has started dating again. Her hair was spun into a chignon, gray and silver with a pearled comb to hold it at one side. She had hope all over, shining in her eyes. But when she looked at me, it was as if I’d caught her doing something she was ashamed of. Something she might hide.

I’d just come from Tony.

“You look beautiful,” I said. “You deserve a nice date.”

I smiled and I gave her a hug. The things we know from those hallways, the sameness of our lives.

I have waited nearly four years without moving, without thinking of doing otherwise. And here is Marianne, getting spun into a woman on a date.

The stylist next to Becca, a new woman I don’t know, is talking to her client, blonde Ruby Leeds, about the day spa, shaking her head, worrying.

I sit down in the chair beside her, and I say, “Forget that stupid day spa, Becca.” And then: “Please cut it all off.”

Becca smiles. “Oh, good! I never get to do anything dramatic,” she says. “It’s always just ‘a tiny trim.’”

She wears her hair gray hair short with a colored streak through it this summer, hot pink. She’s in her fifties. I like her verve. She started going gray at thirty and says she has to do something fun with it or she feels like an old lady.

At night, Amanda brushes my hair before bedtime, just like I used to do with my mother. My mother never cut her hair. My mother cheated with Dr. Smalls, a long time ago, when we switched churches. I'm not going to cheat. I'm stronger than she was.

Becca gives me a pixie cut, and when I get home, Amanda cries. I'm surprised. I didn't think that she'd be upset. But, she's always brushed my hair at night and now, it is gone. I look strange to her. I'm not her same-old recognizable mother in old cut-off jeans and a t-shirt. My hair is short and efficient and new. It makes me feel strong. And Amanda hates it. She hates this new mother before her.

When I get home, I find the slip of paper with Alan Ball's number, and I look at it awhile, and then I dial. It rings and rings, and then a woman's voice comes on to leave a message for the Ball family. A woman. Family. He's married. It's still his number. Will he even remember—the message beeps and then there's silence.

Say it. Say it. Be brave, now.

"I was wondering if we could talk," I say. "I'm—it's Junie Roe. It's been a long time, I know. I hope you're doing well. Would you—call me? When you have a minute?"

And it's done. Maybe Tony's right. Maybe I just need to know.

My father, standing in the snow, hand on his shovel. Saying, *I knew*. A guilt he'd never crawl out from under. He said, *I knew, about all that*. And what could I say to

make it better? Nothing. We all knew, I could have said. We all knew and didn't do enough.

Mary was the one he would confide in. The one he would sit down with after dinner, and talk to about the news, about the physics lesson he'd taught that day or some new discovery about the galaxy. They found a new star, he'd say. Or: black holes, string theory, the rotation of planets. He loved to talk like this. He'd set his feet wide and span his hands in the air and make all the motions for her. Of how the galaxy moved.

She would listen. She was the closest he'd get to any of us.

My mother would come into the living room with cups of tea for each of us. *Digestifs*, she'd say, taking my father's mother's tongue as if that might be a way in.

She'd sit there and say something about the shop, someone who came in, what they sold today. The green tea leaves, the new ones, and the lavender she'd found that was so much more pungent.

My father would nod, and sip his tea, and then turn back to Mary.

I remember watching my mother from the other couch, where I sat outside of the light. And the way my mother picked up the string of her tea bag, and spun it in a circle around the mug, watching it, quiet, and then set it against the side again, holding it there tight with one finger.

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ALAN BALL

That same afternoon, two hours after I leave a message, Alan Ball calls me back.

When I ask how he's doing, he says he got married last year, his wife's expecting a baby, any second.

"Oh," I say. And then remember to say: "How wonderful."

I try not to resent him for going on living while Mary's stuck where she is.

Three years. It's a reminder, to see her friends moving on. Whenever I take Simon to the vet, there's the new hire, Jesse Simms, who graduated in Mary's year from Tufts.

He says, "Of course I'll meet with you. I'll tell you anything you want to know."

"Thanks," I say.

Silence. It's uncomfortable. Maybe I shouldn't have called. I wait.

"What works for you?" he says.

We set the date and time, next Tuesday.

And then we hang up.

He's having a baby. In all the time she's been lying in that hospital, her friend has fallen in love, gotten married, and is waiting for a baby.

I should have said something, years ago, should have told her what I saw her doing. None of us did because she would have gotten angry, would have pushed us all away, and it was so easy for her to close herself off, to *not* call, to *not* stop in when Stella and I were home, to leave herself out of things.

One more push and she'd be gone, we thought. Tenderhooks.

Strangles, colic, sorehead. Mix this potion and there's a cure. Hands running down each leg, searching tendons and swollen cells—muscles torn, throbbing.

The day she drove away, she was high. I suspected something was off about her; I thought she might be drunk, or on too much coffee. I didn't know it was pills, but I suspected something was wrong. And I didn't say—

Leave it, says Stella. Come here and leave that behind, will you? Why can't you just let it *go*?

New Mexico is the answer, she says. Maybe, says Gerald, she's right. School is the answer, says Danielle—your dissertation, have you forgotten *that* you?

I sense a new-age talk around the corner. I harden myself inside, build up this wall I know, and crouch behind it. So I can nod and smile and say what they need me to say, in order to make them believe that I am considering everything—that maybe we will move, or maybe another baby, okay? Maybe. I will think.

An ingrown nail, a pig's foot, sepsis.

The bleeding that will follow when whatever is stuck is pulled free. Mary's lie, my own lies, all of us spun like flies.

She asked her mother mother mother

For fifteen cents cents cents

To see the elephants elephants elephants

Jump over the fence (and it slows) fence (and fades) fence

FOR AWHILE, WE SAY NOTHING

“Gerald?” I kneel down beside the car. He’s underneath. It’s Saturday. There’s always something wrong with our cars. Gerald’s father taught him mechanics when he was young, but sometimes he makes things worse before he makes them better.

“Mm? Can you pass me that wrench?”

His hand, black with grease, reaches out to me. I see what he wants beside the toolbox.

“Here you go.”

I guide the handle into his palm, lay it flat so he can grab hold. Where do I start? With New Mexico, or where he slept last night? I want to ease him into this talk, so he doesn’t close down and keep silent. I want him to tell me. I’ve been watching him all morning: playing with Amanda while he drank coffee in the back yard, thumping Simon’s sides while Simon leaned against Gerald’s legs, cleaning the dishes in the blue sink with the crack down its center, humming to himself (because of his delightful night?) while taking out the trash. I sat in the living room, on the couch, reading to Amanda, but really, listening to him, watching him.

“What do you think is wrong this time?” I say.

“Brakes, I thought, but that wasn’t it. Now I think maybe it’s this wiring.”

He grunts, and pulls at something that comes free. His arm juts out again, just the elbow this time.

“Shit,” he says.

“Not the right wire?”

“Do you need something? Where’s Amanda?”

I turn to see her playing in Jeannie's front yard, chasing after Simon. Jeannie's been dreaming of getting another dog or a cat. Talks about it all the time, since the boys left for camp.

"Jeannie asked to borrow her for an hour. Her boys are at camp all summer, and she's lonely."

My feet are getting tingly from squatting against my calves. I lean my chin on my crossed arms.

"Gerald, so, you know I talked to Stella last week."

"Good."

"And she said something about New Mexico? That you thought we should go? And I want to talk about that."

He bangs the wrench into the underbelly of the car.

"You need to take a break," I say. "I'll get you some water."

"I don't want to take a break! I want this *car* to *work*!"

He bangs three more times, and then his body relaxes. His feet splay out to the side at the end of the car. I touch his elbow. He's ruined this plaid shirt; why would he try to fix the car in this shirt?

"We need a new car," he says.

We need a new car? I need to tell him about the mortgage. Why don't I just tell him, *We don't have any money. We are bone dry.*

Because that would be *my* failure? Because I've forced us into this? No. Because it would mean Mary moves right away, and we'd give up hope for her. So the lie will stand, as long as it can.

“We’ll figure this out. Terence can help you. Come out and talk to me.”

“Terence doesn’t know. Ed knows. I’ll ask Ed.”

“There you go. Just don’t give him the beers until *after* he fixes it.” I try to make a joke, but he doesn’t laugh.

“Will you come out?”

“I need to keep working on this,” he says. And his arms go back into action, and his toes point to the sky again, his body tense.

“Maybe we only need one car, anyway,” I say. “We could share the other one and sell this one.”

“We’ll talk about it later, okay?”

“How much do you think this car is worth?”

“Dunno,” he says.

“A wild guess?”

“Eight hundred, for parts, basically.”

We still owe four hundred on the “good” car, the one I drive around town.

Gerald takes

this one to Blanchard. He says he’d rather break down than have me and Amanda break down somewhere. I mentally calculate, subtracting eight hundred dollars from the mortgage payment: we’d only be behind a month and a half after that. I’ll tell him over dinner. We’ll sell it. That will make his life easier, and Amanda and I can drop him off at work every day. I’ll see what he’s up to. It will bring us closer. Maybe he’ll invite us into his office and read part of his book to us.

“Hand me that wrench?” he says. His arm juts out.

“This one?”

I put one of them in his hand.

“No, with the square hole in the middle.”

I search the toolbox, and shift to sit on my bottom, legs crossed. I hear Amanda scream and laugh. Gerald cranks the wrench with one arm, pushing pushing pushing out.

“So—I haven’t said anything, and I—just want to know why you think we should go to New Mexico. You really believe that?”

He pulls himself out from under the car. It’s an old station wagon, navy blue with wood panel along the sides, a relic from my parents years ago. It won’t last another winter. We’ll be lucky if it makes it through summer. So we should sell it now, before it dies.

His face is covered in oil, black smudges around his eyes and cheekbones. His plaid shirt is torn down the stomach, revealing his pudgy belly—a new thing, this belly. We are thirty-eight, says Stella, what did you expect? She says it in the tone of someone who has not yet reached this point, whose body is still firm, who has not had a child, who does not have the worries of a family, of a sister, of her parents, to attend to.

“Give me an hour, okay, Junie?”

It’s his frustrated voice, telling me he’s done talking. He leans on his elbows. Stays on the driveway, squints up at me. It’s hot, the sun beating down on my back, glaring into his eyes. He’s sweating. I stare down at him.

I shift so my shadow covers his face. He stops squinting. Stares up.

“It was just an idea, okay?” he says again. “She called me at work and said she’s been thinking about this for awhile. That you need a break. She thought she was helping.”

“If she thinks I need a break,” I say, “why doesn’t she come here and give me one. Why doesn’t—”

“—I know, why doesn’t *she* come back? But even if she did, would you go?”

“She won’t.”

“We could go somewhere, like we were planning before all this happened. It’s not too late. Amelia will keep an eye on Mary. We can come back to visit. She won’t even know we’re gone. Your mother can come with us. Stella said her house is plenty big enough. We could stay with her and Merle until we get settled. I could teach History, and Native American Studies at the U. She’s an hour from Albuquerque. I’d actually get to teach what I study. More than I do here, anyway. I’d be an adjunct for now, but who cares—I’m about to get the axe here, in any case.”

“You want to move there? Move there for good?”

“Maybe. It’s worth checking out. Joe and Bev offered to have us stay with them in Oregon, but they don’t have a very big place and they’re hours from a university. New Mexico might really work.”

His voice is picking up pace, excited. He’s been thinking about this for a long time, I can see suddenly—that my version of life in Bolton and our future, and his version, are decidedly different, and opposed. He doesn’t want us to stay here for Mary any longer. He’s given up enough. He has. I know that he has. But.

“You don’t understand,” I say.

“Understand *what?*”

“That Mary knows. She’d know I’d left her. Dr. Smalls said, in the beginning, that she knows we’re there, and that can make all the difference. She knows. So if I keep going back every day, it’s going to help her recover.”

“*Does she know?*”

He stares back at me, the wrench in his hand, grease smeared across his cheek.

Does she? And then I see, a weight dropped into the pond that sends ripples reverberating through my stomach—he’s given up on her.

“You don’t believe she’s coming back anymore?”

He looks down, and lets the wrench fall. His fingers go limp. He shrugs. “I love you, Junie, and I loved Mary, but I think—”

“Loved? Past tense?”

I’m terrified of what he’ll say next, as if he can close a door on Mary and deem her gone, and if he says that, then what will I feel for him? Maybe it will end our marriage, my ability to love him at all—what’s already been challenged by this distance between us, our time here, the financial strains, the sacrifices.

I can’t, I can’t hear what he’ll say next, because it will open a chasm between us that I’m afraid we’ll never broach. What rises up is anger, to make him stop.

“She said a word again yesterday. She said, ‘yes.’ I’d have told you sooner but you haven’t been here. Where were you the other night? Why didn’t you come home? Where did you sleep?”

This is what I want to do, to dig in, to find out everything. All *his* secrets. But it’s come out as a fierce attack, not like the easy questions I meant to ask.

“I slept at school, on the couch in my office,” he says. His voice is tired. He looks away, not up at me.

“On your couch? Why didn’t you call?”

“It was late. I knew you were already asleep.”

He shrugs.

“Was Nadine with you?”

He stares up at me. He doesn’t say anything. My whole body is full of sadness and fury, at this marriage and this town and Mary’s accident and our money problems. All directed at him now, waiting to know if he’s finally betrayed me. Has he? He still stares up, calm, not saying anything. Is he afraid to tell me? Or angry with me for asking? The silence is worse than anything.

“You know what?” I say. “Forget it. Just forget it. I don’t want to know.”

I stand and turn toward Jeannie’s house, walking away fast. I hear Gerald sigh and say, “Fuck,” under his breath, and inch himself back under the car, on the cardboard.

He shouts after me, “I paid the water bill, by the way! You might have noticed it’s hot again?”

Great. Now I can’t pay the mortgage, if he’s paid the water. But I don’t turn around. Jeannie sees me coming and waves hello.

She says, “June, we’re getting one of the Miller kittens! Have you seen them? They were born in May. They’re adorable. We can take him home in two weeks!”

“Wonderful,” I say. I don’t feel like celebrating.

Amanda shrieks and chases after Simon, around a tree. He spots a squirrel and darts for it.

“Simon, no!” I shout. I’m thinking of the shots he needs. *No animal encounters.*

Amanda starts, looks at me, and then Simon trots back to her and licks her face. She laughs and laughs. I lose myself in watching her. It is Mary and me in the yard. We are six and nine. She is pretending with me. She is alive, dancing around me, and she lets me turn her into a princess, a frog, a giraffe. She long-necks her way around the yard, picking her feet up and placing them down just as elegantly as giraffes in the Sahara do. It is this perfect all afternoon. Stella races out to play after her nap, and it is the three of us together again, in the yard, laughing in some alter-world.

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PRESSURE SORES: *When a person is immobile for a long time, blood flow to the skin can be diminished, especially to areas that have weight resting on them. Eventually, the skin can begin to break down, leading to pressure sores (also called decubitus ulcers). To diminish this risk, clinicians or family members must turn the person frequently and get him or her out of bed if appropriate. Other interventions may include special pressure reducing mattresses and skin ointments and creams. If sores do develop, surgery may be needed to repair them.*

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SASHAY

When Amanda was a baby, in the sweetest moments, I would sashay around the house, and sing to her, and tell her the stories of Magdalene. I would speak to her in French, I would tell her fairytales, and the story of Mary and Stella and me, and I would say, Soon, you will meet Mary. Soon, she’ll be back with us. First, I was at my

parents' house, that long fall and winter, pregnant with Amanda, and then Gerald came from Michigan and we bought the little white colonial, a fixer-upper, not a dream to live back here in Bolton but it would be enough. I dropped out of school. The high school job came up. I had Amanda. There were so many difficult moments, and so few sweet. Gerald, newly-hooded PhD, gave up his dream of a job at U of Michigan and took the job at Blanchard College, in Lowell. Blanchard is a small liberal arts college with strong religious ties. He teaches four courses a semester, courses tangential to his specialty in Native American culture, if he's lucky. Usually, though, he teaches American History One and American History Two, and Introduction to World History. It is not his dream. So now this was our life. *Is. Is our life.*

OMAR

Came back to the orchard on his bike, six am, just when I got there. It's July first. On the fourth, we'll have the neighborhood picnic at the orchard, pot luck. Omar wants to make mango coconut ice cream for the barbeque, so Danielle bought the coconut milk and mangoes at the grocery store when she made the trip to Stow the other day.

When he sees me and Amanda, he slides to a stop in front of the barn.

"Oh, baby girl!" he says. He leans down into the back window so he can see her. Rests his hand on the windowsill.

"Here she is," I say. "Say hi to Omar, Manda."

She gazes at him from her seat. She takes an hour to wake up. Not there yet.

“Hi,” she says. She doesn’t smile.

“She’s not awake yet,” I say.

“How old is she now?”

Omar, hunched in the window, looks to me in the front.

“Two and a half.”

He makes a ticking sound with his tongue.

“I know,” I say. “It’s going fast.”

“You have no idea. My kids are getting so big. I talked to Ella yesterday, and she tells me she’s going to medical school.” He laughs. “She’s only sixteen! I told her, ‘Baby, you’ve got to start with the tenth grade.’”

I smile. “She’s ambitious. That’s good. That’s how Mary always was.”

He’s here to earn them their college tuition. This is his dream for them. Back home, he grows chocolate and tobacco, but here, he can make as much in our apple season, late June to November first, as he can all year back home. But it means four months away from his wife and children.

“Did you have a good ride into town?”

He shrugs. “It was okay,” he says. “I went to pick up cardamom from the spice shop. Jenny said she’d leave it in the mailbox for me, when I saw her up here. It was expensive—four dollars a jar.”

“Yeah, I think she overprices it for the tourists. She shouldn’t gouge you, though.”

He shakes his head.

“I could have picked it up for you. Ask me next time, so you don’t have to get up early.”

“I’m up anyway,” he says. He looks at his hand on the windowsill, turns it over, runs his right hand over his palm.

“Have you heard anything yet?”

He shakes his head.

“Tomorrow, she gets the results.”

His wife had a check-up the day after he came here. It was routine, but they found something in her breast, and then there was another appointment, and a biopsy. Now they’re waiting for the results. He promised her he’d come right home if anything was wrong.

“Let me know, okay?”

“Sure,” he says.

He winks at Amanda and pushes off on his bike and heads for the orchard. I sit and listen to the sound of the tires over the dirt road.

I think of the woman at the meeting from the Farm Union. *Is* it unfair, how Danielle asks the Jamaican crew to work? Their days are shorter now than during the apple harvest time, when they might work twelve or fourteen. She says she hired more workers this year to ease the load, so that she could reduce the work days to ten or eleven max. Omar and Remario and the rest of the crew were disappointed, because they want all the money they can get, for this big sacrifice away from home to be worth it. I don’t know what’s fair, and what’s too much. Maybe she should pay them

more per hour, and that's the answer. But then, she'd take a loss, and other orchards would out-price her. She thinks she's doing as well as she can by them.

Danielle came out with Alice, who would stay with Mrs. McCrae for the day, too, and I took them both over. And later in the day, she told me what Omar didn't mention: That in town, on his ride home, some of the kids—in a pick-up truck, he said, he didn't know them—shouted out to him, “Yah, mahn, Jamaica, mahn!” and, “You want some ganja, mahn!”

He complained to Romero and the others, and Danielle overheard, and she was furious. She says this town is getting more conservative with the new rich people coming in. But I think it's the old people, the farmers, the descendents of the ones who ran these orchards and milled the lyme. Danielle says she's writing an Op-Ed for the paper, and she's on a self-righteous tear, ready to take on the bigots, to defend what she's doing here, to protect the workers and her land and the trails—as if somehow all of it is hers to watch over, under her domain. It's hubris. But, in that way, we aren't so different: our ferocious drive to make it better, our need to fix, a battle that we know we can win if we just fight hard enough.

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COYOTES STRIKE AGAIN: Jepson Rollins and Susie Cross reported separate incidents on Tuesday night involving a single coyote, who wandered through the Pine Hill development just after dusk and, according to their reports, threatened their dogs. The

dogs barked, alerting both homeowners, who emerged in time to scare the coyotes away. Residents' concerns over coyote proximity to humans is rising, but Animal Control and state wildlife services assure citizens that they pose no threat to human life. If you see a coyote, raise your arms and shout, throw your keys at it, and wait for it to run off. Do not run away from a coyote, as that will encourage it to pursue you.

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ALAN BALL, 3:30 ON A TUESDAY

I haven't been to Tufts in years, not since Mary was there. We met at the cafeteria once, and another time, she gave me a tour of the grounds, and other times I'd bring her lunch while she was on break from treating animals, or—one day—ride part of her rounds with her. The hospital sits at the top of a hill in Grafton, surrounded by tilled fields and then woods with trails that run through them. There's a barn with stalls for the horses and cows, and treatment rooms and post-surgery rooms, which are metallic and sterile. Special areas for cleaning animals and their wounds.

When I visited one spring, there was a horse with fertility trouble, and a vet put a sonogram wand into her vagina, and then showed us the images of the womb on the screen. It was just the same as what's done for humans—a computer with a screen, the same diagnostic process. In the stall behind this horse, there was a small Palamino who had bowel problems, diarrhea dripping down her behind. It was the vet tech's job—a young college student, interning—to clean him, and then Mary would examine him, putting her hands inside his rectum, reading the x-rays of his intestines, telling the tech to give him another round of antibiotics.

None of it smelled very good, and it was messy, and the people who owned these animals were paying hundreds of dollars a day to have them there.

As I drive up, stomach heavy and clenched, I remember the smell of the barn, the nicker of the horses, the shrill whinny of the mare who missed her friends back home, having just been brought in that morning. She paced the stall, tail raised, nostrils flared, searching for them. By the time I left, her neck was wet with sweat. Sometimes, I hear stories on the news of extraordinary animals—cats who travel one hundred eighteen miles to find their owners—and now, since the accident, I understand why an animal would do that, how it could.

Alan and I agreed to meet at the front entrance, near the PR department offices. We'll have a quiet space to talk there, he said. He asked if I was sure this is where I wanted to meet. We could get coffee, he asked. No, I insisted. I wanted to be back here. Maybe, being here, I'd find something more of her past.

He looked the same, but with less hair. He made a joke about it, rubbing his head.

"Getting shinier," he said. "But still good. How have you been?"

I nod. I smile. I say: "Great." I cross my arms. My skirt blows against my legs. I'm self-conscious, suddenly. *I'm great. We're great.* He must know that's not the truth. If it were, I wouldn't be here.

"Yeah? Well I'm glad to hear that? And—" he hesitates, "how's Mary?"

"Good and bad days, but she's been tracking me lately. That's a good sign. And I'm looking into a new experimental treatment, which could help her speak."

He makes a face almost like a wince. "That *is* good," he says, "yeah."

I could see him, in his earlier days, one of those laidback *yeah yeah yeah right on, no worries*, kind of guys. Surfer on the wrong coast. He looks better than he used to, when I'd met him with Mary the year before her accident. Now, his shoulders are wider, muscular, his belly rounded out, his cheeks rosy. Back then, his hair was longer and scraggly, tangled blonde curls, and he was too thin.

He gestures to the upholstered benches to the right of the front doors, and we sit. The glass entryway lets in all the sun. It's too warm.

"So." He claps his hands together and leans his elbows on his knees. "You remember Jefferson?" he said.

I nod. "Of course. He stopped coming around a few months after the accident."

I cross my legs and arms again, bearing myself up for what's coming, making a wall.

"I think he was making it worse, you know?"

No, I don't know. My face must show it.

"Look," he says. "I don't know how much you know about what was going on. What did she tell you?"

"What did she *tell* me?"

I draw back, sit up straighter. The windows face the front of the campus, and from here, I can see the grand old elm trees lining the driveway. They must be a hundred years old.

"About what was going on? I don't know. Not much. I knew she drank a lot sometimes. I didn't know about the pills. I learned about that after the accident, when the ER staff told us it was in her blood. Then I looked in her purse, and there were

little pill bottles with animals pictured on the caps. So, I'm guessing she was using those bottles to disguise what was inside?"

He rubs his face with one hand. Shakes his head. A pair of people walk behind us, talking about budgets.

"I'm sorry I haven't come in so long," he says. "I know I should have, but it's just hard, and—now, with the baby, we've been getting ready."

"Everyone stopped coming. Months after it happened."

There's a line of sweat running down his forehead, from his hairline. He keeps his elbows on his knees and looks up at me, hunched over. A door opens and closes. I feel sweat drip down my stomach from between my breasts.

"Don't they turn on the air conditioner in here? We're cooking," I say. I pull my shirt out from my body, fanning.

"I'm so sorry," he says. "I'm so sorry for your whole family. Mary was a good friend. I should have come to your father's funeral. I heard about it from Eva last year. I was sorry to hear. Mary always said such good things about him. I know they were close."

I want to run away. I don't want to have a heart to heart, I don't want any sympathy, I don't want to risk crying, I just want to hear his story and then get away. Mary and my father were close, yes, the closest in the family. He loved her most. Should I tell him *that*?

"Should we go outside?" I say. "Let's go sit in the grass? Would you mind?"

"Sure. Of course," he says.

We walk out the doors and the air comes rushing cool, a breeze blows against my body. I breathe in a deep breath. We sit on the grass under one of the big elms, just in front of the entrance, him cross-legged, me with my legs to my chest. I pull my skirt over my knees. It's a new one that I bought at the Goodwill last week, in Stow, for ten dollars. We can't afford it, but I tried to justify it to myself, that it was so cheap, and I could wear it into the fall when school starts up again. Green cotton. I bought it thinking of Tony.

“Okay. Tell me what happened back then.”

He sighs. “We were all studying constantly, because we were in our second year and three of our friends had dropped out the spring before.”

I nod. I try to look patient. I interlock my fingers over my knees. My back is sore. I'll talk to Tony after this.

“So.”

“Just say it, Alan, I can take it.”

“So, in our first year, before fall semester finals, one of our friends had some Phen phen—it's a diet pill—and someone else had their medicine for ADHD, which they shared. It was all easy to get, and we all took it.”

“That night? To study?”

“Not just that night,” he says. “After that, we took it all the time.”

He nods slowly, up and down, waiting for me to understand.

“Oh,” I say. “So those were the pills she was hiding in the vet bottles, which we found after the accident.”

“Well, no. In our second year, we met some students who had access to the vet meds. And, you know, some of us had trouble sleeping. Mary had trouble sleeping. We were messed up from all the uppers. We’d drink a lot to kind of, knock out the uppers and fall asleep.”

“You were doing this, too? *Vet meds*? You were taking what the animals take?”

He nods, and looks down at his legs.

“Sorry to say I was. We all were, at least this group of us in our year. Maybe ten of us. I don’t know if everyone did.”

“And none of your professors noticed?”

He shook his head. “If they did, they looked the other way. We have a huge workload, and after our third year, we work with the vets. It just got to be more and more complicated. And once we started, we thought we really needed it.”

“That’s why you were so skinny back then. And Mary, too.”

“Yeah.”

“So, we got a hold of tramadol and valium, phenobarbitol—pretty much any drug we wanted, we could get from the school supply. One of the professors was in on it, and he’d sell it to us. I don’t know how he covered his tracks. Someone said once that he made up cases that he’d prescribed it to. Charlie the sick dog, whatever.”

“Mary knew him?”

Alan nodded. “Yup. She’s the one who bought it from him for us, and then she’d dole it out to us.”

“My sister was basically a drug dealer, you’re saying? And all those pill bottles she had, with the animals on them—those weren’t the disguise? Those were animal pills?”

“It’s the same medicine for animals as for humans,” he says. “So, yeah, it was animal meds, but they’re exactly the same as what humans get. It’s just—easier to get them this way.”

“And she dealt them?” Even coming out of my mouth, it sounds funny—what’s the right verb for drug dealing? Sold? She sold them. She was a dealer.

“Ehhhh,” he rocks his head side to side and squints a little. “Drug dealer? That’s a little extreme. She just made it easier for us to get it. I guess you could say, I guess, she supplied us.”

I think of Mary at the bar, making out with the men she’d poo-pooed moments earlier. I think of her string of men, anyone she wanted, all her life. Her beauty and her confidence in that way—she knew she was beautiful, and she knew she was smart. Everything else, though, was shakier ground.

“Was she, were they together?”

“Not really, no. Jefferson wanted to marry Mary, but she sometimes hooked up with Dr. Ames, so there was some tension.”

“That’s why Jefferson stopped coming by.”

“Probably. He was angry at her when she—when the accident happened.”

The wind picks up and the trees rustle. A car pulls up with squeaky brakes. I shift so my knees are to one side, one hand resting on the ground. Alan's still sweating. There's a line of perspiration on his upper lip.

"How come?" I say.

"He'd asked her again, to marry him, and she said no. She said she'd never marry anyone, and he should stop asking. Then she slept with Dr. Ames again that night, just to spite Jefferson."

I shake my head. "It doesn't make any sense."

"Well, Jefferson was taking all this stuff, too. She was smart not to marry him. He was a chef. You know what that business is like—drinking all night, cocaine to get through as it gets later."

"I didn't know that."

He wipes his lip and looks at me, concerned. "Are you sure you want to hear all this?"

"No."

He nods. "Let's talk another time. We don't have to do it all at once, now."

"There's more? How much more?"

"Some," he says. Noncommittal.

She was dealing and taking vet meds, she was sleeping with Dr. Ames *and* Jefferson. There's more? But I think of Tony, and his saying, "It might be better to know," and he's right—I need to know. To understand what happened.

“I’m not sure,” I say, “but I want to know. I can take it. We’ve already been through—” I shake my head. “I would’ve called you sooner, but I didn’t know if you could help. Tony suggested you might know—”

“Tony?”

Shit. “I mean Gerald said, Gerald, he thought you might know some things that would explain what happened.”

An ant crawls up my leg. I shoo it off.

“I feel terrible, June. If I’d known what we were doing, I’d have stopped. I had no idea. None. I was doing it, too, and I couldn’t see straight anymore. I’m in recovery now. I go to meetings. Alice, my wife, she’s a nurse here, and she got me help, right after the accident, when I was so depressed. I feel awful, still, though, that Mary’s stuck in that place, and we all got our shit together because of it, and we’re all vets now, and she’s in there.”

He wipes his forehead, his lip. He shakes his head and wipes his hands on his pants. Khakis. A yellow dress shirt tucked into his pants. A brown belt. He’s put together. He really is doing okay now.

I want to say something comforting. Something like: This is how it was meant to be. Or: Mary saved you all, and that’s what matters. But it’s not what matters. She matters. Her life matters. She wasn’t meant to be the sacrificial lamb.

A group of people walk behind us, laughing, sorting out who will drive where.

“I wish I’d done something, sooner, I wish I’d stopped her, or told someone. But I was doing it, too. All of us were, all our friends. It’s not so uncommon here. Lots of vets use.”

He runs his hand across his forehead, mopping sweat.

“I don’t blame you,” I say.

It’s the best I can do.

He nods again. I stare into the grass.

“Why didn’t she tell any of us?”

“We didn’t know what we were doing—we just tried to get through.”

It’s not an answer, but I don’t press him. He’s anxious. The front of his yellow shirt is dark with sweat. He rubs his hands together, over and over. I need to be more generous. Help this poor guy.

“It’s not your fault,” I say. I force it out. My voice sounds cold, distant, but it’s the best I can do. I say it because it’s what he needs to hear, but I want to grab my bag and hit him across the face with it, saying, *Yes, goddamit, it’s your fucking fault. YOUR fault, for not saying anything, for knowing what we didn’t, and doing nothing!*

Wouldn’t it be nice, to pass on the blame to him? To let myself off the hook? It would be nice.

But there’s my father in the snow, one hand on the shovel, saying he knew about all that. And me with Mary the year before, the months before, on the phone that year, watching her pace and hearing her quick speech and seeing the bags underneath her eyes. And *didn’t* I know? Didn’t we all? We knew something, enough that we could have intervened and teamed up and pushed her to find out what was wrong.

Alan’s hands are shaking when he sets them on his knees. He doesn’t meet my eyes. He stares at the grass.

“This is harder than I thought,” I say.

He laughs a little, a hyena laugh, nervous and high. “No kidding!” he says.

“Maybe we should meet again another time. I can’t really think anymore, and this is hard on you. I didn’t realize it would be this hard.”

“I’m fine, really.” He looks up at me now, meeting my eyes. He looks tired, as if this conversation has worn him down.

“Anytime, anytime. Of course. Really, June.” He nods, too eager, and rubs his hands on his thighs, as if to dry them.

I stand up. I want to forgive him, give him a hug, make him feel better, but I’m angry at him, too. He knew what was happening, he was part of it, making it worse, and none of us knew. If we’d only known, for sure, wouldn’t we have done something then? Maybe we’d still have been cowards, tip-toeing around her.

“How about one day next week?” I say. “We could meet at a coffee shop somewhere?”

“Absolutely,” he says. “Thanks, Junie. I needed this. I didn’t realize.”

He reaches forward to hug me, and I can’t stop him. I hug him back, my chest against his sweat-soaked shirt, my hands on his sweaty back. I feel his hands pat my own back, three gentle pats, and then he lets me go.

“Next week,” he says, and we walk down the path to the parking lot, making small talk. I ask about whether it’s a boy or a girl. I ask about his wife. I try, very hard, to be kind to poor Alan Ball, who, I can see now, has suffered as much as the rest of us—maybe more.

DRIVE

Faster, faster down four-ninety-five, all the way to Worcester. Not even thinking, just driving. I think of Tony. Why now? I don't know—but there he is, his eyes on me, his curled-up dimpled smile, his arms, his chest. Don't think of him, not now—selfish. I pull a little slip of paper out of my pocket. I have carried it with me for three days now. There is his name: Tony Pellatria, in his funny all-capitals handwriting, and his phone number, in blue ink. There he is. How easy it would be to dial the number. To sit with him again. Just to feel him near me. A little respite. Put everything on pause. Tell him what I learned about Mary, the vet meds—Tony will help me understand it, sift it through. He's been waiting to hear what Alan says, even—*waiting*, interested in this.

Yet I am driving for Gerald, on instinct. Not to talk but as if to catch him in the act. And then I'll be free to do what I want.

I pull off at Exit Ninety-five, Blanchard College. I will find Gerald. I will find him, maybe with Nadine, maybe with some twenty-something grad student, someone thin and wrinkleless and young. Someone who is carefree, fanciful, who is pursuing her degree or who *has* her PhD – someone like Gerald thought I would be.

I turn down West Way, a right past the coffee shop, Dunkin' Donuts, American Bank, the rows of old brick factory buildings turned into shops, to the fields and then the big gray stone buildings. To the Humanities Building. Park in the lot that says, FACULTY ONLY, big block letters, who cares? It is summer. No one is here but the workaholics and the Security Guards. I pull up the brake. Hard.

Thinking of Tony, of his hands, and how it would be to sit beside him again. Stopping time, stopping this life: No decisions. No doctors. No Mary-trapped-in-there. No husband who's drifted away, or daughter who needs so much of me. A little break from all of us, to sit with Tony and laugh and pretend none of this exists – that this whole life, four long years, never happened.

I walk up the four flights of stairs, too impatient to wait for the elevator, khaki shorts— why didn't I put on a dress? Something else, something more sophisticated. A t-shirt and shorts, with apple stains all over. My old apple green crocheted purse swinging against my hips.

All the way to the top, breathless, there is his office. The light is on. A ray down the center of the gray hall. I think of Imago. My heart beating fast.

He walks out of his office, hands in his pockets, whistling. Turns right. Does not see me. He walks into the department office, and he takes a paper cup from the counter and fills it from the water cooler. The glug, glug, glug of it.

Stands there and drinks it. Head back. Stares at the wall. In a second, he will turn back. In a second, he will see me.

There is no Nadine here. It is just Gerald, all alone. Wanting all this space and all this quiet for himself. And I am angry, now. I am angry that he has this, even though it is not another woman, and even though I know that he deserves it, after all he's given up.

But he has gotten his escape. He is still doing what he wanted to do all along. Studying the ancient tribes, looking at the artifacts and making up stories of their lives. *This pot signifies sophisticated artisanship; look at the decoration, the symbols that*

mean—Here I am, in these stained summer shorts, my long hair all a mess down my back, working at the orchard. Taking care of Amanda. Taking care of Mary, and my mother. Meeting with Alan Ball to learn things that I could not have imagined. *Animal* meds, he said. Animal meds. Everyone is doing it. Animal meds. This can't be normal.

I take three steps back, to the stairs. He does not turn. He does not see. I back into the stairwell, and walk all the way back down. Slowly, now.

And I think: To be with someone new who I've always known, to hear another story that is not part of this town, to hear Tony talk again, watching his lips move, to feel his empathy, to have a teammate in this news about Mary—just that much would be enough. But I resist. I won't call, I won't. I can't do that.

SALON

On the way home, there's Katherine, Carla's mother, outside the old railroad station building, across from the office park on one seventeen. The railroad depot is a one-room red house, with a little chimney, its windows shattered, the roof caving in on one side. It sits alone in a weedy lot encroached upon by bigger and bigger trees each year. One hundred yards over, there's the beige seventies tree-house style office building—three stories, each one seeming a little off-kilter, big windows—with the dentist and the podiatrist.

I slow down to see what she's doing there, and the car behind me rolls up to my bumper, impatient. I ignore it in the rearview.

She's hanging a sign across the front of the building, wind blowing at it. It's a fabric banner, plastic-glossy, and it says, *Katherine's Day Spa*. A day spa. A *day spa*?

Now Bolton has a day spa? Danielle's going to roll over laughing when she hears this, and then get furious. And only a mile from Shear Madness, too, in the old Colonial Store building. She has some nerve, my mother would say.

I shake my head at her.

The car behind me honks, lays on the horn, then swerves around me to pass, barely missing the oncoming cars.

"Nice!" I shout.

The window's closed. No one can hear. On impulse, I look ahead—no one's coming—and make a fast u-turn. Turn into the lot, where Katherine turns and waves. Big smile. White white—impossibly white, why do people do this now?—teeth.

"Junie!" she says. "My first customer!"

I slam the door shut behind me.

"First customer? No. What is this? You're opening right down the street from Shear Madness? Don't you think that's a little—I don't know—aggressive?"

She puts her hands on her hips and shakes her head. Squints into the sun.

"Aggressive? How so? My place is a day spa. Shear Madness just does hair. And, if they're good, they'll do just fine with us here."

"They've been here for two decades. Becca Norris has four kids in college, all supported by that shop and her husband's farm. You probably eat her corn all summer."

I feel myself getting louder, and louder, and that's fine. I'm not holding back on Katherine.

"Sweetie, you need a massage or a good soak in the tub."

“Don’t call me sweetie. And *what* are you doing making reports on the orchard crew?”

I push my hair out of my eyes, behind my ears.

“What’re you talking about?”

“I read the paper, Katherine. You’re trying to get the crew in trouble for swimming at the pond by reporting a fire?”

“I smelled smoke,” she says. She turns her head away, slightly, to look at me sidelong.

“You don’t need this,” I say. “This is a hobby for you. Don’t do this to them.”

She crosses her arms and stands up taller.

“Like I said, I’m no threat if they’re any good.”

“This is abominable, Katherine,” I say. “Abominable!”

And I turn and get back into the car before she can say anything. I pull out, casting dust all over her, back onto one seventeen, heading home. It’s not until I’m nearly there, back home, that I realize I gave her my teacher dressing down, which I save for when the students are out of control en masse—in the cafeteria, shouting, or when the food starts to fly, crisis moments. And then it’s almost funny, and I laugh at myself, haughty and superior in Katherine’s dusty day spa lot.

THESE THOUSAND MILES

“Stella, I need to talk—”

“What? I can’t hear you, hold on.”

She turns off the mixer.

“What are you making?”

“Cookies. For Merle’s birthday.” She makes a smacking sound. “Vanilla glaze. Mm.” The sound of her licking off a spoon or a finger. “I don’t have time to talk. He’ll be here any minute. I’ll call you later.”

“Just for a second—”

“*What, then?* Hurry up and tell me.”

The clock on the mantle ticks. Back and forth. Simon lies on the tile in the kitchen. Sighs. Amanda hums in the living room, coloring on the floor. I’m perched on the stool by the phone, toes curled over the top rung. My back is sore from hunching, that spot above my right hip, and up through the top of my back, too. I sat here and dialed three times. Hung up three times. I imagine Stella in New Mexico heat, a tank top, sweating, cacti outside her window. Is that how it is there? I want to tell her about Tony. How I’m imagining being with him, and about what Alan Ball said.

“If you’re not going to say anything, I have to go. I don’t have time to talk to you. Call Mom.”

“Great, thanks, Stella. She’ll be a real help.”

“Well then tell me.”

“I’m just trying not to do something.” I stop for awhile.

“Do *what?* I don’t have time for you to be cryptic.”

“Forget it,” I say, “Nevermind. There’s something I learned about Mary.”

“What’s that? Another treatment? Can we talk about this when I get there. It’s only a week away.”

“Not a treatment,” I say.

“Junie, I don’t have time. Let’s talk later. Love you.” And she hangs up.

I walk out the door with Amanda, drop her at Mrs. McCrae’s, and go to the pond for a swim. Head into the black water, fingers cupped to push it past my body. Breathe, gurgle-and-push, breathe, gurgle-and-push. I lose myself in this rhythm, in the cocoon of water. See a white sliver at the edge of my vision—a stream of bubbles, or a fin? A child’s foot, kicking.

*

LOOKING AHEAD: HOW DOCTORS DEVELOP A PERSON'S PROGNOSIS

A variety of outcomes are possible following a severe brain injury, everything from death to extremely good function (though the latter is rare). In the early stages following the injury, doctors may use the following to determine which are more likely:

The person's score on the Glasgow Coma Scale. A lower score indicates a worse prognosis.

The Glasgow Coma Scale

Best eye response (E)

4. Spontaneous
3. To speech
2. To pain
1. No eye opening

Best verbal response (V)

5. Oriented
4. Confused
3. Inappropriate words
2. Incomprehensible sounds
1. No verbal response

Best motor response (M)

6. Obeys commands
5. Responds purposefully to pain
4. Withdraws from pain
3. Flexes in response to pain
2. Extends in response to pain
1. No motor response

Doctors add the scores from all three parts of the test. A patient with a total score of less than 8 is considered to be in a coma.

*

CLUB

I was in college when Mary worked for the law firm. It was one of those big Boston firms, three names in its title. Quelner, Fipson and Trill. One hundred years old. Say the name and see a gilded sign. It was her first job out of college. She was a paralegal. In two years, she would go to law school and get her JD. At (where else?) Harvard. This was Mary.

I was a senior at Wellesley, ready to slack off. It was December. I had finished a semester with perfect grades, four point oh, said my father when he saw the sheet at Christmas. Stella rolled her eyes and went back to her drawing. She was a sophomore then at UCLA. Art major.

We all went out dancing on New Year's, to a cheesy Boston club with a dance floor in the basement. Big stones lining the walls, cavelike. Neon lights flashing. A wide, wide dance floor. Mary wore a little dress, Stella wore a skirt, and I wore jeans. We all wore sneakers. Best for dancing. This was the late eighties.

People around us twirled their glo-sticks, music thudding in our bodies. It was that time. Here, said Mary. She shouted. She held something out to me on her palm. Small white pill. I looked up at her, both of us sweaty.

“Ohhhh,” said Stella, “ex,” and she grabbed it and popped it in her mouth. Grinned at Mary. Downed it with water.

“Have you done that before, Stella?” said Mary.

“Yeah. Three times.”

“With who?”

“My *friends*,” she said, and then she hopped off dancing.

“You want one?” Mary turned to me. “Here.” She took another one out of her pocket, from a little plastic bag full of pills like these.

“Here,” she said again. “Take it.” She pushed her open palm towards me.

The neons lights all over us.

“I don’t want it.”

She looked at me a minute, shrugged and said, More for me, and swallowed it down.

“Oh, that phase,” she said two years later.

“It’s over?” I said. “No more of that?”

“Over,” she said. “Yeah. No more of *that*.”

And I almost asked her then, why that tone? But I didn’t. I let it go. I was about to start school again, my Master’s and then (I thought) my PhD. I was distracted. Gerald and I were moving in together, looking at little one-bedroom apartments in Michigan, and I was only home for the weekend.

Plus, it was what I wanted to believe—that it was a phase. I did not want to face Mary’s imperfections, her dark secrets. None of us did. We believed what was easier, what we wanted to believe. We believed in what we hoped—not what we saw, not what caught in our guts. No.

“Good,” I said.

REST

We meet at the playground. I don't know why. It just fell out of my mouth: 'How about the playground?' and when I said it, I was surprised. But I was also surprised that I had dialed his number. And also surprised by the things I'd been thinking about him (his eyes, his arms around me, his skin touching my skin).

Last night, Danielle said, "He came by the orchard again today, helped Terence out for awhile."

I tried to sound casual, "Oh?"

"I saw you two talking at the wedding the other night. What was that about? When you were getting beers?"

We were in the shop, and she moved from the register to the row of pies on one of the shelves. I was making neat rows of raspberry boxes on the other side of the store.

"Is that what all these new dresses are about, a crush?" she said. She turned to look at me, I could see from the corner of my eye, but I wouldn't look at her. I kept stacking boxes of berries, lining them up just so.

"June, look at me."

I turned and looked at her. Raised my eyebrows, annoyed. "Yes?"

"You're all red. How come?"

I shrugged. "Leave me alone, okay, Dan? You can be so pushy."

"Hunh," she said, "isn't that interesting." It was her angry tone, saying she's done with me for now. She walked out of the barn.

I think of this at the playground, what Danielle would say—that she would never suspect that I would call him. She would never know any of this. From here on out, we would keep this between us. I felt it. We could be secret friends. I only wanted to talk to him, and watch him, and be near him. That was all. When I thought of him, I woke up. I was alive again. I just wanted that—the rush of him near me.

We're at the playground behind the school, the school we both went to when we were small. Mrs. Clinton's third grade class together. Mr. Bick's fourth grade. And then in fifth grade there was the nun's house, and then in seventh, us swimming at the pond—the kiss, and after, the time we made out in his brother's car, in their driveway. We snuck out at night and met there. His hands all over me, under my shirt, down my pants. I touched his penis that night. I didn't know what else to do but touch it. And then, six months later, he found someone else—Margaret Jones—and we weren't friends anymore. Then it stopped. And I found Gerald in high school.

We swing on the swings awhile, side by side. He watches me as he swings. His green eyes. His smile. A dimple on one side. I think of his lips on my lips. I do. And then I push it away. Away. Away. Stop it, Junie, I say to myself, you are married. To Gerald. Who has stood by you through all of this.

I kick at the sand with the tips of my sandals. Feel the grains slide between my toes, rub my skin between the leather straps. I painted my toes pink this afternoon, just after I called him. Amanda and I sat outside in the shade, and I painted all her fingers and toes pink, too.

“Pretty skirt,” he says.

“Thanks.”

It's the white eyelet skirt that Mrs. McCrae gave me last summer when it didn't sell at the shop. She sells all kinds of dresses now, not just wedding gowns. Says she's *diversified* to suit the new market.

I don't say to Tony: I wore this for you. Or: I also put on this new lotion that I bought, lavender, for you. Or: And this tank top, and these earrings, whose dangle I love to feel against my neck, for you, for you.

He laughs. "You nervous, Junie?"

I look up at him and let my hands slide down the swing's chains.

"Nervous? *No*," I say, indignant, stubborn. "Why?"

He laughs again. "You seem a little nervous. I feel like we're on a date or something."

Now I laugh, shy. Oh, god. "A date," I say. I concentrate on the way my skirt moves as I swing, against my calves, and how I can see my feet on the upswing, and then pull them back to pump. How the wind feels on my bare neck.

On impulse, at the next swing forward, I jump off. "Come on, let's walk."

So we do. We walk into the woods at the back of the playground, then onto the road that winds behind the school and up into Beech Hill. There used to be acres of beech trees, but now they're all dead because of the beech tree disease that no one could stop. Now the town is replanting oaks and maples and pines, little clusters of saplings that get thicker and thicker as the hill rises.

We walk and don't say much. Up the hill, into the woods, onto the trail that branches off to the right. I breathe hard, and Tony huffs a little.

In the woods, it's quiet. There's the sound of robins and mockingbirds and grackles, and a woodpecker far away, pounding. The wind rustling those sapling leaves.

We walk side by side, him with his hands in his pockets, telling me about his ex-wife.

She was from Utah, he says, and moved south to Texas to be with him.

"But after awhile, she wanted different things. You know how it goes, he said. You just sort of drift apart."

"Sure. I can imagine."

He looks at me.

"So, you and Gerald are doing all right?"

"Yeah, we're okay."

"Even these last few years? Really?"

He says it matter-of-fact, like he knows I'm not telling the truth. Otherwise, why would I always be here with him? Is he intuitive enough to know that? Probably, yes. He seems to see through me.

"You know Gerald. He's so steady."

Tony nodded. "He is. He's always been a good guy. Solid. I knew you two would be okay."

"So, I've been waiting to hear—what happened when you met with Alan?"

I haven't told anyone, and it's been nearly a week, holding this news in. How will I say it out loud? Now that I've buried it, maybe it's easier to keep buried. Maybe

I don't need to talk about it. I don't need to shame her to anyone else. I'll keep her secrets hidden.

We stopped and sat on a boulder.

"You don't want to talk about it?" he says.

I shrug, and it's as if all of the pretense—my earrings, my skirt, the lip gloss—it all falls away. I don't need to dress up for Tony. He said I was sexy when I wore my worst orchard shorts and a dirty t-shirt. Tony has been my friend forever. I can tell him all this ugliness.

"I don't know," I say. "I guess I do."

He's quiet. He's good at waiting.

"Well, basically, Alan said she was getting animal med's."

He shakes his head, arms crossed. Leaning against the boulder. I'm perched on top. I don't have to see his face this way, so it's easier to say it all.

"What do you mean, animal med's?"

"I guess it's something vets do. They take the same meds that animals take—I mean, we all do, certain things, like anxiety meds and painkillers?"

"Holy shit," he says.

"Yeah. So she had a vet there who would get the meds for her, from the small animal clinic, and she'd distribute them to her friends."

He rubs his forehead with one arm, the other still across his body.

"God, Junie, I'm sorry."

"It was a lot worse than we thought. I mean, I thought it was drinking and some pills that she was getting from her doctor, you know? Like, she'd get a

prescription and use it when she was stressed out or needed to study. I didn't know it was all the time, this much. This many pills. These kinds of drugs. And that she was desperate enough to get it at the clinic. Risking her job?"

He turns around and puts his hands on my crossed legs, up on my thighs, by my hips. He looks up at me, into my eyes. I look back at him. I smile, and then I cry—the way he's staring at me, and the only person who knows this secret. The tears just roll out, down my cheeks, and I feel my mouth turn down. I'm embarrassed. I rub one cheek.

"I'm sorry I told you to talk to him," he says. "I thought it would help."

I shake my head. "It did, it did. I'm glad I know. I mean—it's worse, but it's the truth, too. At least I know the truth."

He nods, moves his hands to my arms, rubs them up my shoulders. And oh, this touch, it feels so good, so soothing. This is the reaction I craved. This is the touch I need.

"Thanks, Tone," I say.

He nods. Keeps his arms on mine. Wipes my cheek with one hand. This would be the moment, when I lean in to kiss him—it would be so easy. He's gazing at me, his hands on me, the vibration of his skin on mine. But I don't lean forward. I stay where I am, as if there's an internal line I can't cross.

"I'm going to meet him again soon. I guess there's more. He got tired, telling me, and we kind of called it quits for the time being."

"Good," he says. "I'll go with you, if you want? If you need company?"

I think: Yes, then: No. No, Tony can't come. Shouldn't Gerald be the one to come? Why isn't this Gerald, rubbing my arms and being kind and listening to this story? Why is it Tony, and not him?

"Thanks," I say.

I scoot down from the rock, and he pulls back so I can land on the ground. We walk back towards the playground. I tell Tony all about Amanda, how she is very precocious, how she likes to paint and draw, and she can already count to nineteen and likes me to sing her the ABC song before she goes to bed. *A-b-c-b*, is how she sings along. I tell him, Stella's coming soon—next week, she would love to see you, wouldn't it be fun to catch up, all three of us? And you could come see Mary with me. And my mother would love to see you again—a string of words, on and on, because I cannot stop and look at him. We're back at the playground. We stand facing each other. I hear cars drive by on Elm Street, across the soccer field. Can they see us from there? Are we far enough away that we're unrecognizable?

And as I talk, he leans closer, and closer. I pretend that he isn't. I pretend I don't see his body so close to mine, that I can't smell his skin—like pumpkin pie—that I don't see his lips, his lips getting closer, closer.

"Don't look at me," he says.

So I do. I turn toward him, and he grins, and says, "Gotcha," and I'm so close to his lips, so close to his face. Almost, I think, just one small motion, what could look like accident, to fall a little forward. The trees behind us singing, the little trees bending and singing. The blur of it, the green swirl of the field. Him at the center.

I pull back fast and laugh. I turned away so he can't see how flustered I am.

“I’d better get going,” I say. I start to walk towards the car.

“As always,” he says.

“What?” I turn back to look at him. The sky is clouding over, and it’s getting windy and cool. Rain coming.

“Nothing,” he says. He grins. “I’m sorry. You’re married, that’s all. And I’m not.”

And there it is: in the open. “That’s true,” I say.

A pause. The cars going by. The wind pushing my skirt against me. I feel the chill of it through my t-shirt, against my bare arms. My skin goes into goose-bumps. I glance back at the parking lot, where our cars sit waiting—my car, which might be gone by next week, waiting. I think of a swift escape, with Tony, off into the sunset. But, no—I am here; I am stuck here. I can’t leave Amanda, or Mary, or even Gerald or my mother.

“Maybe we shouldn’t spend so much time together?” I say.

He shakes his head. “No. No, don’t do that to me, Junie. I love spending time with you here. It’s the only thing keeping me sane while I pack up my mom’s house. My old house.”

I smile. I hardly ever listen to what’s happening with him. He’s always listening to me. I’ve been selfish.

“Ready to head back?” I say, and tilt my head toward the parking lot, a little dirt square by the road.

“Yeah,” he says. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

We walk back across the field, side by side, and I lean into him every now and then, a little bump of our arms, until he laughs and leans back into me, and I laugh, too. And then there's the sound of tires behind us, the crunch over dirt and gravel. I pull away from Tony and turn to see: a boy in a jacket and a hat pulled down over his eyes, off at the edge of the field, fifty yards away. Darkened, so I can't see. And then he lifts his gaze, and I catch his eye, and it's Bruce. Bruce on the orchard bike. Why hasn't he returned it yet? It's been a week.

"Bruce!" I say, and he comes closer. And louder: "Bruce!"

He doesn't turn to look again. He keeps his head straight, and doesn't say a thing.

"Who's Bruce?" says Tony. "A kid from your class?"

I shake my head. "Fuck," I say. "No. He works at the orchard. Did he see us in the woods, do you think? Did he follow us?"

Tony shakes his head and laughs. "Why would he do that?"

My stomach pinches, a sickening turn.

"This gossip town," I say. "Everyone wants to know everything."

"He was probably smoking a joint up there, is all," says Tony. "Bet he's worried about us seeing him."

He reaches his arm across the void I've made. He touches my shoulder.

"June," he says. "We haven't done anything wrong."

I pull back again. "This town," I say. "You don't understand how insular it is. Everyone wants to know everything, and they talk. You have no idea. Don't you remember, from when we were little? We didn't even know, then, how bad it is."

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SHATTERED WINDOW, BOLTON CRIME LEDGER:

Police are inspecting a crime that occurred last night at around one a.m., when a resident called in a disturbance at the Toy Shop. The resident reported hearing several men's voices, then the sound of shattering glass and laughter. When police arrived, the suspects had departed. The resident reported that the men were dark-skinned.

How could she have seen in the night? The 'resident' was clearly Bess Morgan, who rents the apartment above the toy shop and is legally blind. Did the police take that into account? The police, right across the street, who arrived too late to catch the "suspects," that crew of teenagers who've been wreaking havoc all summer?

*

WITH MARY

I stare across the bed at the red poppy chair, and beyond the red poppy chair, the window. Outside, the wind blows the oak tree on the hill. The grass is green. In the distance, dark clouds. A storm could roll in. I'm angry, but I don't want to blow up at her. I try to breathe slowly, through my nose.

“Remember when we went to Girl Scout Camp and we hated it, and Paulina Chepeski told us we could run away with her?”

I don't look at Mary. I watch the tree. The way the smallest branches shake in the wind. The undersides of the leaves turning up. “Storm coming,” Grandpa would say, and point to the white bellied leaves, flipped in the wind.

I lower my voice so no one else will hear, as if Mrs. Bing or Amelia might be waiting for some hospital gossip. But this is still a secret.

“You were taking all those drugs,” I say. “That's why this happened.”

I want her to blink, to recognize the truth. I want her to turn to me and confess, to tell me the whole story, so that I can forgive her. Why did she put herself through all that? Why did she take all those drugs? Why did she put herself here? Why didn't I save her? Why didn't any of us see her, at least drinking—that much we knew—and not saying anything?

“You stole *animal drugs*, Mary. What were you thinking? What was the matter with you? What could have been that bad, that you needed animal drugs to make it better?”

I turn to look at her, expecting a reaction even though I know there won't be one, not today. When I walked into the room, she didn't even track me. She just stared straight ahead. The scars on her face are my answer, though, the pock marks, the big slash from one side to the other, diagonal, and her thin hair and her legs so thin, with the machine around her calves to keep her from clotting. It seems to inhale and exhale, expanding then contracting, moving her blood.

“I wish you could explain,” I say.

“Oh, Junie,” she’d tell me, “not everything has an answer. You can’t pin it all down. Sometimes, the world doesn’t make any fucking sense.”

Then she’d turn, her long black hair swinging onto her back, and march to her pick-up truck—the one she was planning to buy as soon as she started in Concord—and she’d jump in. Wave with one arm out the window, music blaring from the radio. Punk rock. A band I don’t know. Loud.

“Efshosh,” she says. Another word. My heart skips. Her mouth hangs open and loose, drool spinning to her blue shirt collar. I touch her arm.

“Yes?” I say. “Mary, say it again.”

I keep my hand on her arm, waiting. I watch her face, but it doesn’t move. Her mouth doesn’t even twitch.

I grab the notebook by the table, a yellow book, small enough for a pocket, and I write down: *efhosh*, on a new page. More words will come. I set the book down, the pencil beside it—the sound of the pencil on the wooden table—and I watch her again, my heart still beating too fast. I lean back in the chair. Maybe she’ll speak again if I keep talking. Maybe that’s what triggers it.

“Paulina took us through the woods, on that path, and we were laughing so hard because we got out of swimming lessons. I hated swimming lessons. Missy Swepton was the teacher, and she was so strict. I hated how they tossed us off the dock—remember? Uch. And Paulina said there were leeches in the water. So we ran away. Through the woods. To the other pond, remember?”

“And there was the big raft out in the middle, and we tore off all our clothes and jumped in. I didn’t become a good swimmer until the next year, when you taught

me. You said, ‘You just have to know you aren’t going to drown. Then you’ll be able to swim because you won’t be scared.’

“You said that to me when we were in the pond, and I wouldn’t go over my head. I was afraid of leeches and turtles and what had happened to Dara—I was sure it could happen to me, too. Because who knew? I was scared.

“You came back for me, and you held my hand, and said, ‘You can do it. Follow me.’ And we swam out to the raft side by side, and climbed up the ladder and sat on the wood. Basking.

“We stayed there for over an hour before they found us. We were asleep when they hollered from the shore. I remember sitting up and thinking, ‘Let’s swim to the other side. They’ll never catch us.’ It never occurred to me that they could run around the whole pond in fifteen minutes. I thought we’d be hours from them. I thought we’d be untouchable.”

There is a sound in the hallway, the squeak of a wheel. I know it is Mrs. Bing. I know she’d like to visit.

“I’ve seen Tony lately,” I whisper to Mary.

Does she hear? What would she say to that?

“Good. Go live your life, try something new. Drop that domestic routine with Gerald.”

I try to forgive her. I watch her face, her mouth open. I wipe the drool from her lower lip. I don’t turn to say hello to Mrs. Bing. I am back at that pond.

“Put your head into the water,” she says. “You can do it. You’ll see. Put your head down, and kick.”

We make it through the black water, I swim through all that fear, swimming in spite of what sea monster might get me, the snapping turtles who could bite off my fingers, the plant that might trap my leg and pull me under, drowning me like Dara was drowned. I hate that I can't see into the water, past my own legs. I want to know what's coming. I pull myself onto the raft with adrenaline still pulsing through me. Mary comes up after me, and we lie on our backs, resting. There's a harvest moon, rising full on the horizon, gloriously large, tipping its face towards us, orange-hued.

"Look at that big moon," she says. "It's the moon of new beginnings. Make a wish for what you want."

Her voice is loud and clear and certain, and there's a music to her speech, the lilting up and down. I never appreciated it enough then—the sound of Mary's voice. I watch the moon and wish for a lifetime of this: I'm on the raft, with my perfect sister Mary, both of us breathing hard, chests rising, and the moonlight is on our bodies.

VI.

ROCK

Time, says Raymond at the rehab center, is something abstract, made up by the mind. He had to learn to think, the focus on the process of thinking. Stay with this thought to the end. Plots are hard now; he cannot follow them. His brain skips around, cannot remember what happened first and then second and then third. His name is Raymond Gavrennes and he is from Northern Maine, way up near Bar Harbor. He used to fly fish every summer. Now it is a feat to watch a movie and remember the whole thing as it goes. His wife bought him all three seasons of The Sopranos, and he watched them from beginning to end, each tape over and over, until he could remember what happened in each one. His own sort of therapy, he said, to be able to tell the ending of a show he'd seen before. His wife's name is Claudine, and they have two grown

children who come with their children on the weekends. Raymond isn't here anymore, but they still come to visit. Some people don't get any visitors at all. Bernie and Xavier, at the end of the hall. So they get all of the Gavrennes every Saturday, maybe knowing who they are and maybe not – but either way, it is a bright spot in their week. They smile when they are together. They laugh. Raymond says how lucky he is. He can walk. He can speak. He still has his family. He has made so much progress. Still, he needs his lists to remind him to turn off the lights, brush his teeth – those routine things he'd forget. But, otherwise, he says, How lucky I am.

He sees me on Saturday and says, "Where's that husband of yours, Junie?"

And when I shrug and say, "Who needs him? I've run off with someone better," Raymond laughs hard.

When he laughs now, his whole face lifts, like he's really in that laugh, like he doesn't want to be anywhere else but here.

"I'd better warn him next time I see him," he says, and as he turns, still chuckling, hands in his red-pants-pockets, he raises his eyebrows and gives me a wink.

*

VETERINARY MEDICINE: More and more animals are being maintained on things like Valium and Phenobarbital pills to manage pain or seizures, or as a sedative. Just as addicts go from doctor to doctor, requesting more pills, so some people take their pet from vet to vet. Since the animal can't communicate how much pain they are or are

not in, it can become very difficult to prove that a person is just on a pill hunt for themselves.

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ANOTHER SUMMER WEDDING

Danielle waves from the top of the hill, wearing her green knit dress with the gold stitching around the hem, her favorite dress for weddings because it stretches and keeps her cool. The white tent is set up on the hill, the stairs leading up to it—wood beams set into the earth with grass growing on each step—swept clean. Today, there are pots of yellow daylilies on each step. This is what we did, all morning, wedding prep.

The picnic tables have been moved to the side, and a cluster of white-tableclothed round tables are set in their place, with candles on each one, waiting to be lit.

Everyone moves fast on wedding days, carrying pails of flowers or plates of food or polishing silverware or folding cloth napkins. The Jamaican crew is off in the orchards, though, hanging traps for the apple maggot fly and replacing the cardboard strips around the trunks, keeping the moth larvae away.

At the top of the hill, under the tent, there are more tables—ten or twelve—and a dance floor made of interlocking wooden squares, all shiny. There is a stage with a long white table and a row of lilies in glass vases. Behind the tent, there is a little grassy clearing, a square between the edges of the vineyards. At the front there is an

archway wrapped in ivy and flowers—lilies, roses, baby’s breath, dahlias.

The flowers come from Adelaide’s Flower Shop in Southborough, where she works out of her barn and serves all the weddings between here and there. She brings them in her white truck with the logo on the side, and she is famous for her arrangements, especially for weddings.

Danielle and I walk up the long row of stairs. I want to talk to her about Alan Ball, and talk about the shattered window at the Toy Shop, but she’s rushed, too, trying to get everything done at once, before the wedding. And I don’t want a gruff answer, to this news. I don’t want to hear, about Mary, “What did you expect?” or, “She was a mess.” I want sympathy, softness.

“Here,” she says. “Can you take this up to the arch for me?”

She hands me a leather-bound book.

“It’s all the readings,” she says.

What’s their name again?

“Jerricho. From Andover.”

“This is a long way.” Andover is north of the city, and we’re west, an hour or so out, though it feels further because of the woods and the orchards. Once, a train ran from here to the city, but now it only carries cargo and passes through—no stop.

“Well, her mother grew up here.”

Danielle is all efficiency today, directing the dozen workers here to help. We walk to the shed, behind the gazebo and the barn-shop, and get two boxes of wine. It’s dark and dusty and hot in the barn. Flecks of dust spin through the light that comes from the high windows. We head for the stacks of boxes to one side, which are here

just temporarily. Tomorrow, they'll be moved to the temperature-controlled room that Manuel built off the shop. She gestures for me to take one, and she takes the other, apple and plum. My back flares when I pick it up.

“Ah,” I say. The sound escapes me, like instinct.

“What?” She turns back to look at me. She's getting sweat marks under her arms on the dress, a darkening moon-silver of green. She always changes too early and then makes a mess of her clothes. She forgets to wait, every time, until she's done all the work.

“Nothing, I'm fine.” If the box presses against my belly, it's not so bad. I can support it this way. Danielle turns around again and we head past the barn, for the stairs.

“Do we know Aiden Jerricho's fiancé?”

“No. I can't remember her maiden name. Something Irish-sounding. She moved away in the sixties and they met last year at a fundraiser in Boston, a ritzy gig at the Kennedy Library.”

“Where's Terence?”

Terence is Danielle's lawyer husband, who works in Hudson. He has his own firm, with an office in one of the converted Victorian houses downtown. He employs another lawyer and an assistant and a paralegal. They do civil cases—amicable divorces, property exchanges, wills. Terence hates confrontation. When he decided to go to law school, Danielle cackled, a moment of cruelty, and said, “But honey, you don't want to fight with *anyone*. Remember when you made me talk to Mrs. Shinwall about the fence?” Mrs. Shinwall, their neighbor, hated the fence they chose for their

property line, when they lived in a tiny cape on the other side of town; Mrs. Shinwall lived across the street and didn't want to look at "that gaudy green color" all day. Danielle brought her a pie, and they worked it out in Mrs. Shinwall's doily-surfaced, pale blue living room. She and Terence would paint the fence white. That made Mrs. Shinwall happy. They figured she was ninety, so it wouldn't be long before she was gone, anyway; let her live out her last years without the barb of a garish fence in her side.

Terence told Danielle that he'd be the kind of lawyer who just wrote things, not the kind who argued in court. He looked hurt. We were in our twenties then, home during a summer break and sitting on the benches in Faneuil Hall, cobblestone under our feet, tourists swarming around us. Danielle and Terence only been married a year, and Gerald and I were "living in sin," as my grandmother called it, in Michigan. Until then, Terence had been bartending. I think he wanted to impress Danielle with the law degree. I think he wanted to claim some status, that maybe he needed more clout, or to prove something to himself. She's a force! I could see how he felt diminutive sometimes, next to her.

Danielle picks up the box of wine again, and I heft mine up, too—there's the back twinge, and I wince but say nothing, ready for it this time. We climb the stairs. I watch the wooden beams and squares of grass underneath my feet—one, then the next, then the next—focusing there instead of on the muscles screaming in my back.

She says, "He and Tony and Gerald went out for beers."

I stop. My feet just don't move. But she doesn't know, I remind myself: Keep climbing.

Danielle turns back to look at me.

“What?” I say.

She eyes me, then turns back and keeps moving. I wait. Then, casual:

“Where’d they go?”

“The *Squire*, I think?”

She emphasizes the name of the bar, as if it’s irrelevant and she’s too busy to think about this. Her voice twists up the end. She’s wondering: Why do I care? Stop pining for Tony, she’s saying.

“Is something going on with Gerald? Is this about New Mexico?”

Bruce trots up the stairs, passing us, his feet a quick pad on each step. He’s young and lively. He knows that Carla is up at the top. A few of the waiters skip up behind him.

“We had an argument last week. He didn’t sleep in our bed that night. He says he slept at his office.”

“Let me guess—you think he was with Nadine.”

She walks to the tables to one side, and with a grunt, sets down the wine. It’s red and doesn’t need chilling. She slides it under the table, then does the same with the one I set down. A waiter is working behind the table already, polishing and lining up the wine glasses, cups down, one by one.

“Hey there,” he says, and nods at us both. I don’t know him. He’s from the company Danielle uses to hire waiters for events. But the food is all hers, always—different concoctions for every event.

“Of course I do,” I say. “That’s not true. I don’t know. He wouldn’t answer when I asked him.”

The sun shines down on the archway and the white folding chairs are all lined up to watch the ceremony. I rearrange the napkins, overlapping them just so, perfectly even.

“He probably didn’t want to dignify the question with an answer. He probably wants you to trust him.”

I roll my eyes even though she can’t see me. I think of Tony, in the woods the other day, with guilt—but then, I don’t have to feel guilty if Gerald is doing the same, do I. The smell of the charcoal grills drifts over. They wanted ribs, a real cookout. A casual wedding, Danielle’s favorite

“He hasn’t earned my trust lately. He’s never around, and he doesn’t tell me anything about what he’s up to, or his book. I’m shut out.”

“I know,” she says. “Hand me that lighter?”

She points to the long lighter on the table, which she’ll use on all the chafing flames.

“It’s been a hard few years, but he’s just got his head down to finish that book. What can you do? Nothing, right? So just wait it out.”

She starts lighting the candles, turning each one on its side to catch the wick.

Today, I know from her weeks of conversations and planning, there will be potato salad with thyme and coriander, pasta salad with peas and green peppers, an assortment of French cheese and fruit during cocktail hour before dinner. And then? Ribs. She’d been blending different barbecue sauces all spring, and asking Terence

and Gerald and I to taste test them. *More honey, or more hot pepper? This one has a splash of ginger—too much?* Plus, cod cooked in foil on the grill for the pescatarians. Grilled tofu and vegetables for the vegetarians. A wedding cake for dessert, with blueberry frosting made from her own berries and topped with her purple and yellow violas.

“The guys will be back in an hour to help us with the grills,” she says. “The Jerrichos should be here any minute. Come on, I need your help with these napkins.”

She gestures to the pile on the side table, waiting to be folded. Carla walks up with the chafing trays, each one ready to be filled from the grill, and Bruce follows with a tray full of beans. Then they wander back down the hill to get more supplies. Danielle slides the candles underneath each tray stand, and then goes to the grill to stack the food into the trays.

“We need to talk about the workers,” I say.

“What about them?”

She’s balancing the trays in one arm, and the fork in the other, jabbing pieces of meat and jiggling the fork until they drop into the pan.

“You should have asked if they wanted help this summer. That’s why they had a hard time with the new workers.”

“Well, I was trying to make their lives easier.”

She shakes the fork with vigor, nearly toppling the tray when it lands.

“Right,” I say. I lay the napkins out, one on top of the other. I’m always stacking things at the orchard, making rows, tidying. “But they didn’t want less hours. They wanted as many hours as they could get.”

She turns to me, gesturing with the fork.

“Last year, Omar hurt his leg at the end of the season. Remember? He couldn’t work for two days because of the sprain. Romero looked like hell when he went home. They’re all getting older. I wanted to make it easier on them. *I’m* making less this year because I’m paying five more workers.”

I shake my head.

“I’m just saying, you should have asked them. You can’t just make decisions on their behalf without talking to them. It’s a little—”

“A little what?”

I was going to say *patriarchal*, or something about colonialism, slavery or indentured servants, Gerald’s words, but Carla and Bruce come up the hill and land beside us.

Carla goes to hold the trays for Danielle, one by one, until each tray is full, then sets them on their stands, flames set to keep them warm. Bruce stands beside the table playing with a hacky sack, kicking it with his toes and heels, then catching it and starting over.

“Mrs. Roe,” says Bruce, “heard you gave Carla’s mom a scolding yesterday, hunh? You got *pissed*, she said.”

“Shut up, Bruce,” says Carla. “I told you not to say anything.”

She scowls at him from the grill and then comes over with another tray, this one piled with corn on the cob cut into 4 inch lengths. I’m at the end of the table, still piling napkins that don’t really need rearranging. But all I can think about is Bruce on his bike, gliding past me and Tony—what did he see?—and Tony and Gerald, off at

the bar, and what will be said? Will Tony will reveal anything? These conversations we've had?

“What do you mean?” Danielle says from the grill.

“What'll you do about the Toy Shop?” I say. “The accusation of the workers?”

Danielle shakes her head, but watches Carla.

“Mrs. Roe got out and yelled at Carla's mom at her new salon,” says Bruce.

“She told her she's an aggressive bitch!” He laughs, kicking the little red and green sack. He's gotten bolder since he started working here; maybe it's since he and Carla started dating. Maybe he's gotten closer with the crew who picks him up some nights—who squeal into the drive with the stench of cigarettes and pot flowing from the open windows.

“I didn't call her a bitch at all,” I say.

“It's fine, Mrs. Roe,” says Carla.

She covers the corn, metal on metal clatter, and takes an empty tray back to Danielle.

“I'm sorry, Carla,” I say. “I should have thought about you. I just got angry, because she's competition for Becca's salon, and they're having a hard time right now.”

“Your mom opened her salon?” says Danielle.

“It's a day spa,” says Carla. She holds the tray out for Danielle, her arms sinking a little as it fills with ribs.

“A *day spa*,” says Danielle. She raises her eyebrows and leans around Carla to catch my eye. “Oh, I see.”

I smile. The smell of barbeque sauce and honey and lavender—Danielle’s ribs recipe—makes me hungry.

“So Junie went after her, hunh, Bruce?”

“Oh, yeah,” says Bruce. “It was like freshman French all over again.”

“You weren’t in my freshman French class, Bruce.”

I stop piling the napkins and walk over to Bruce.

“It was legendary. Everyone’s heard about it. They could hear your voice in the cafeteria.”

Danielle laughs. “Junie’s dark side,” she says.

“They could not,” I say. I laugh, too. That class was awful, full of kids who didn’t want to be there, half of them stoned in an eight am class, and I couldn’t convince them otherwise. I was still hormonal and exhausted, breastfeeding Amanda. I hadn’t slept in two days. I snapped, and yelled, and told them they needed to start paying attention or they’d all fail.

“I saw the salon, and I just flew off the handle a little,” I say. “I was in a bad mood.”

“It’s okay, Mrs. Roe,” says Carla again.

“I’m surprised you were in a bad mood,” says Bruce. He eyes me.

There’s a pause, while I watch him, and he smirks at me. So then.

“Danielle,” I say, turning to her, “have you found that missing bike yet?”

One threat for another.

“I had such a good walk in the woods the other day, Carla, did I tell you?” says Bruce.

She's balancing the tray, full now, and only glances at him.

So he saw. He saw us in the woods. And he's not going to back down.

"Bruce, make yourself useful. Set up chairs for us, hunh?" Danielle gestures to the stacked chairs. "Eight across, with a gap in the middle for an aisle."

Carla sets down the last tray and she and Bruce wander to the other side of the lawn, up by the gazebo.

"That's a shame," says Danielle. "A day spa? Good lord. But that'll be hard on Becca, you're right."

My heart is racing. In the woods, he saw, and he's ready to tell.

"What's that?" I say.

"The spa, Junie, the spa—what we were just talking about."

"Yeah. I know. The new people will all go to Katherine's."

I breathe in and out slowly, trying to calm myself. Danielle closes the grill top, slides the vent shut on the bottom.

"You can't go around yelling at people, though, June. Especially not when you work here. We have to keep good relations with them."

"Okay," I say. "Got it."

I was trying to be conciliatory, but she takes my short answer as resistance.

She shakes her head. We don't say anything for awhile. The kids bring up vases of

flowers, and Danielle and I arrange them on the tables. Sunflowers. Brown-eyed

Susans. Dahlias. Queen Anne's Lace. Field flowers. All from the shop in

Southborough, whom we tell everyone to use. The kids talk as they go up and down,

about a concert they saw together last week, and a party that might happen when so-and-so's parents are away next weekend.

"We can hear you!" says Danielle, and they laugh and walk back down for more flowers.

Carla and Bruce keep setting up chairs. Each one makes a clacking sound when it's snapped open—white wooden chairs. They're talking about something I can't hear, low steady voices.

"This is his second marriage," she says. She shifts a glass vase, turning it so the best part is to the front.

"He's married now?"

"That's why we're *here*, Junie. Right?" She looks at me and laughs. "You're such a daydreamer. Are you with me?"

"Oh. The Jerrichos." Of course. "Yeah? I guess that's not too uncommon these days."

Danielle shakes her head.

"I guess," she says. "I don't know how people do it. Look, she put in poppy pods this time."

She points to what looks like a large nut: beige, a rounded base with divots that lead to a pointed top.

"Pretty," I say. "Do what?"

"Break up and move on like that. Just fall for someone else all over again. I don't think I could stand it."

Danielle has always been grounded, practical. That's what my father would call her. *That woman's going to run her goddamn life*, he'd say. And she does. She organizes meetings for the Bolton land preservation, the land trusts, for the coyotes, and to get all the orchards and farms in the county organic. She rebuilt the orchard, expanded the vegetable fields, and developed the CSA program so everyone from the town could buy a share. She's been with Terence since they met in college, and they got married just a few years after. She taught her daughter Alice to read when she was three, long before kindergarten, and runs a program during the year that brings elementary school kids to the orchards for education days. She's focused. She doesn't question herself, or her marriage, or anything, really, even though it might be good, now and then, to rethink things, like what happened with the workers. Not Danielle. She sticks with her commitments and plows forward.

And me? Beside her, I'm the dreamer. I want to do impractical, whimsical things like move to Paris with Gerald and Amanda, translate poetry and memoirs by my French-Canadian ancestors, take meandering walks—not *hikes*, as Danielle calls them, but *walks*—through the woods. Is it because her family was so steady, growing up, and mine was—was—what it was? My mother was depressed and gave up too much for us, not realizing why she came to resent us so much. She'd slip away, sometimes, into a silence we couldn't penetrate. And my father would get angry, senselessly, unpredictably, when we asked for something like new running shoes or school supplies. *Goddamn, you girls!* he'd roar. He was otherwise quiet, taciturn sometimes but usually just quiet, lost in his thoughts about physics, and what he might have been if he hadn't landed in Bolton, at the high school, with three kids and a

depressed wife under his wings. So Mary became his favorite, his great hope. She'd be the one to accomplish things. She'd escape him from here, by becoming a veterinarian, earning that label doctor, with her reputation in town as the most beautiful, most accomplished, smartest. She was the one.

Beyond the vases, I've been watching the orchard, the way the light is waning.

The sunlight is falling through the apple trees. It's four o'clock, my favorite time of day in the summertime, when light goes honeyed and thick. The leaves shine. The shadows of the trees fall long, draped over the grass. There is a quiet, and a shift, in the air. The night insects emerge and flutter. When the wind blows, I feel it across my whole body—every inch of skin.

Danielle says, "Right? Don't you think? Wouldn't that be unthinkable?"

Is she testing me? *Does* she know I've met Tony twice this week?

I stare up at the sky, and her voice fades to a blur in my ear. She keeps spinning the vases, shifting them forward and back, then saying, *Good*, with each one.

"Mary spoke another word," I say, quiet enough that she may not even hear—which is fine. She won't celebrate it with me, anyway; she'll tell me to be cautious. I stare out at the sunset.

"Good." Onto the next vase.

"Look at the light," I say.

We're drunk on beer, the end of the night, and exhausted. I've changed out of my work clothes and am wearing a new dress, from the Discount rack at TJ Maxx in Maynard, and he is here. With Gerald and Danielle and Terence, and Omar and

Romero have come up to have a drink. All of us. After the wedding, now that all the guests have gone home and the staff are cleaning up. There are white lights strung up around the nearest trees—not the apple and pear trees but the two small sugar maples—and Chinese lanterns hang from their branches, and at every dip on the edge of the white tent.

During the ceremony, Tony stood in front of us and to the left, and I darted glances at the back of his head whenever I thought Gerald was distracted. His hair is thick and dark, his shoulders wide, the back of his shirt taut; he has a squat football player's body, where Gerald was always a taller, softer baseball player. I chastise myself for comparing, suck in my stomach hard, trying to make myself stop. I hold my breath, fold and unfold my hands: stop thinking of Tony, don't imagine his hands on my body, stop thinking of the way he felt when he leaned into me and away at the pond, stop STOP. But it doesn't work. I can smell him from here, like his pheromones are lurching towards me and luring me in, Disney cartoon smoke with crooked beckoning fingers.

Gerald and I sit apart from everyone else, at the back of one of the tables. All the guests are gone. We ate what was left in the serving dishes—ribs and pasta and potato salad, and drank more beer, and relaxed while the rest of the crew finished cleaning up. Now and then, Danielle jumped up and gave instructions—this table to the shed, these chairs folded and lined up in the other storage unit, *No, Bruce, over here*, and so on.

I get up to get a fresh beer from the cooler under the bar table, waltzing across the lawn, trying to look sexy in case Tony turns. And then he's beside me, pulling the cooler out and opening the lid.

"Allow *me*," he says, exaggerated chivalry.

I turn to look at him, and he winks and chuckles. Then whispers, "You look beautiful."

I feel myself flush, embarrassed but pleased—beyond pleased, thrilled, my heart racing—and bend to take out the bottles. One for Gerald, one for me.

"You and Danielle and Terence need one?" I say.

I don't look up when I speak to him.

"Yes, ma'am," he says. His hips are just beside my head, and he leans to one side. He's wearing seersucker pants like a local prep.

I stand up with five beers in my arms, the cold against my skin, water dripping down.

"When will I see you?" he whispers.

We're facing each other. I look at him, into his green eyes, flashing, alligator-eyes, and then away—at Gerald, who's saying something to Terence.

"Tomorrow?"

"At the pond," he says.

"I talked to Alan Ball," I say. "I want to tell you about it."

"Good," he says, a little louder. I duck my head, as if I can hide our conversation by shrinking myself.

"Not good," I whisper.

He lets the lid fall, and as I turn, I see that Gerald's watching us now. When did he turn? What did he see? I walk faster towards him, across the lawn, then remember that I have all the beers and turn to Danielle and Terence. They're talking about their daughter Alice, and the camp she'll attend later this summer, for young environmentalists. It's a local day camp, and they'll learn to identify plants in the woods and take hikes and swim in the ponds. Danielle and I went there when we were little.

"Remember the sky guy song, Junie?" she says to me as I approach.

I laugh. "Of course."

She sings: "*I'm a sky guy, you're a sky guy, we are sky guys all, and when we get together, we do the sky guy call. Ow ow a-woooo!*"

I join her at the end, with the wolf call, up to the sky.

I've reached them. Danielle's relaxed now that the wedding is over, and Terence has an arm draped around her shoulder. Romero and Omar have their feet up on their chairs.

"For you," I say, and hand them each a beer.

"Guess what we're celebrating?" says Danielle.

"What's that?"

"Omar's wife is okay. It's not cancer!" she says. She rubs his shoulder with her free hand, and he smiles.

"Really?"

Omar nods. His face is glowing, delighted.

"I called her last night. She got the results. All clear."

Romero laughs. “Yes, indeed!” he says. And lets out a whoop. Back home, Romero and Omar are neighbors. Their kids have known each other since birth. They help on each other’s farms.

“I’m so happy, Omar.”

I lean down and give him a hug. When I stand back up, his eyes are teary.

“It’s good, good news,” he says.

I smile. “Yeah, we could use good news around here. That’s a relief.”

He nods and wipes his eyes with the collar of his shirt.

“I’m sorry everyone’s been so awful to you this summer,” I say. “I don’t know what’s wrong with Bolton this year.”

Danielle shakes her head. “It’s their rotten souls!” she says. She takes a big swig of beer.

“Maybe it’s the heat,” says Romero. “New Englanders hate the heat.” He laughs and shakes his head.

Tony sits down next to them. Their chairs are turned to face each other in a circle.

“For you,” I say, to Tony, and again, I don’t look at him, just keep my eyes down and wait for his hand to take the beer away.

“We talked to Michael Barrone. He’s not taking any of their talk seriously,” says Terence.

“We’ll have another town meeting,” says Danielle. “I’ll write a piece for the paper.”

Omar shakes his head. “It’s just the way it is,” he says.

I walk towards Gerald.

“Why don’t you guys come sit with us?” says Terence.

“In a minute,” Gerald calls, fifty feet away.

I try not to look back. *Don’t think of Tony, don’t think of Tony, don’t think of Tony.*

Tony, Tony, Tony, Tony, Tony, Tony, Tony. His lips, thick and ready, half-open.

I hand Gerald his beer and flop onto the chair beside him. Tony’s laughing. Terence says, “And that was it,” and Danielle cuts him off, “No, nuh unh, Terence, tell him the rest! The mud! We got stuck in the mud!” They’re telling the story of their trip to Maine last summer, and their car getting stuck in the mud. I sigh.

“Omar’s wife is okay!” I say. I lean back, stretch my legs, and cross my ankles.

“Good news,” says Gerald. His voice is flat.

“Let’s go sit with them. Want to?”

There’s a layer of tension, but underneath that, I’m relieved for Omar, and happy for good news. One thing has gone right. She is okay.

Gerald takes a swig of beer, looks over at them, then turns to me. He’s sweaty at his temples and hairline. His cheeks are flushed. Something’s bothering him. His jaw is set.

“Tony said you two had lunch a few weeks ago,” he says. His voice is hard, like it was that time we went to the bank to remortgage the house, like it is when I say, ‘Just one more year here,’ like it is when I tell him, ‘No, I do not want anymore kids,’

thinking, *then I'll be consigned to a housewife-life, and I'll never get out of this teaching-high-school trap.*

I can't breathe.

“Oh?”

He looks at me, head cocked to one side. “And?”

“We did, just some sandwiches.”

He looks back at the three of them laughing.

“You didn't say,” he says.

I turn to look at them, too. Terence leans back and slaps his leg, says, “No, no, right on you?”

It's the cow shitting on Terence story. They stopped beside a field, and he went to take a picture beside the cow—why, when we have cows here in Bolton, I don't know—and Alice was laughing, and another cow walked up beside him, and there it was—the incident.

“Why didn't you say so?” says Gerald.

I pick at the beer label. Sam Adams. Good Boston beer. Aren't we the locals.

“I did, didn't I?”

The corner is coming off. The glue is too strong, and the paper tears, cutting off the list of ingredients. I start at the other corner.

“No,” he says. “You didn't.”

“Well, I thought I did.”

Casual. My voice light, as if it was just an oversight. I want to say: And you didn't tell me about your talk with Stella. And you don't tell me anything about your

book, or what happens with Nadine. You didn't call me when you decided to sleep at the office. You deserve this. But I can't get angry, because then I'll reveal too much, and this will look like what it is: I want Tony. And what else haven't I told him? The call from the bank. Haunting me now, two lies.

Behind us, Jack and Millie and Carla and Bruce fold up the chairs and hold them two by two against their hips, walk them down the stairs to the barn. Carla says, "Shut *up!*" and they all erupt with laughter as they walk downstairs. The wood clacks against their legs, loose hinges. Carla's laugh rises in pitch, and Jack says something to her; she's mad at Bruce this week.

I've picked off Sam Adams' face, in the circle frame on the label. I rub my fingers together so the paper drops to the grass. I turn to Gerald and take a long sip of beer.

Finally: "I could've sworn I told you."

He shakes his head. "Nope," he says.

"It was probably a night you were working late. I must've already been asleep and just forgot."

"Mm."

I touch his thigh.

"I paid the water bill," he says.

Shit. If he paid the water bill— "Out of which account?" I say.

"Checking. Of course."

I nod. Should I tell him now, about the mortgage? The car payment? How deep in debt we *really* are? That if he's paid the oil bill, we can't pay those bills, and now we're in foreclosure?

"Is there anything else you haven't told me? That you've forgotten?" he says. His voice. That edge. I can't tell him now. Later, when things are calmer. And anyway, who is he to judge me for keeping secrets?

"Why didn't you call me the other night to say you wouldn't be home? And why didn't you tell me about New Mexico?" I say.

He turns to look at me, and his face has shifted. The anger's gone and he looks confused, eyebrows pressed together. He's bewildered. He's innocent.

"What do you mean?"

"C'mon. I've been trying to talk to you about this."

I pull my hand back and set down the beer on the chair beside me. It's off balance and tips over, a clink and then the sound of it draining into the grass.

"Let's talk about it later. I've been waiting for the right time."

Drip. Drip. Drip.

"It's already mid-July. Summer's passing. So maybe you don't want to go to New Mexico, either."

He puts his hand at the back of my neck, turns to me, and smiles this tired smile.

"What I want," he says, "is to get out of this god-forsaken town, where my father was the town drunk, and all you do is take care of your sister. You barely pay attention to me and Amanda. I want the job I didn't take in Michigan. I want to be

where I can do my research. But here we are. This is it.” He shrugs, and takes a sip of beer, looks out at Danielle and Tony and Terence, who are laughing.

He’s had too much to drink. He doesn’t talk like this unless he’s been drinking. I want to tell him that he’s acting like his father, but it would be too cruel.

“So it’s either where we’re stuck, or what you want?” I say. “What about what *I* want?”

“Isn’t that what we’re doing here? We’re here because it’s what you say you want. To take care of Mary and your mother? You won’t tell me the truth. You won’t tell me what you *really* want, because you’re too scared to leave this and go after it.”

“You didn’t come home that night a few weeks ago,” I say. “Not me. *You*.”

I shake my head, stand up, and walk away. I ignore the pull of Tony, the cluster of laughter with Danielle, the coziness, and I walk down the stairs. Arms crossed.

“Junie! Hey, Junie!” Danielle calls.

“Let her go,” Gerald says. “She’s in a funk.”

That makes me angrier—his resignation, his judgment, as if all of this is my fault, my mood. He knew that would make me angry. I get to the bottom of the steps, and there’s the dirt parking lot out behind the gazebo, and I take the car. Is he right? Am I just too chicken to take what I want? Am I using all this as an excuse?

The decision is easy—the wind coming through the windows, my fury, the quiet of this town. I drive down one seventeen to Gen-Rad, then turn right down that winding road through the woods, and I go to the pond.

It's black and still. Dara is swimming here, underneath the surface, white and gleaming, an ever-child.

I slip off all my clothes, leave them on the beach, and walk into the water. It slides over my feet, my hips, my breasts—cold, a chilling, good cold. I dunk under, delighted in the sound of water in my ears, the quiet roar of it. I bob up again. My limbs look golden just beneath the surface, and beyond my limbs, there's just black—water deeper and deeper. I think of Omar's wife, the relief she must feel, to know she'll live. I wonder how they survive these summers apart. I turn toward the other coast of the pond and go for a swim. Head down, turning left and right with my breath, each arm pushing the water around my body, hands cupped, arms reaching forward, legs kicking. I taste the pond water in my mouth. I kick.

This is the rhythm that saves me. This is the world I know.

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VETERINARIAN ACCUSED OF ABUSING DRUGS DURING ANIMAL SURGERIES

... Cathy A. Johnson-Delaney's Kirkland clinic, the Avian and Exotic Animal Medical Center, is now permanently closed...An employee witnessed Johnson-Delaney in the clinic's operating room in June wearing a mask used to administer an inhaled anesthetic called sevoflurane... Another employee heard the machine that administers an anesthetic being used during the early morning hours on at least a dozen occasions, between April and June. Surgical staff also witnessed Johnson-Delaney

inhaling and abusing an anesthetic while performing surgical procedures on animals, according to the charges.

The Veterinary Board of Governors on Oct. 11 found that Johnson-Delaney violated state law by committing unprofessional conduct. In response, a Veterinary Board of Governors judge suspended Johnson-Delaney's veterinary license on Monday. ...

Johnson-Delaney's license was also suspended in August 2011 for similar conduct.

She allegedly took isoflurane, an inhaled anesthetic, on five occasions in March and April of 2011...Also, between May and June of 2012, Johnson-Delaney was accused of professional misconduct after she boarded a pet turtle named Rocky....

The turtle's owner expressed health concerns with the turtle and after two weeks under Johnson-Delaney's care, Rocky's condition deteriorated significantly, the documents continue.

The turtle's owner took Rocky to another veterinarian, who was unable to assess the pet's care at the Avian and Exotic Animal Medical Center because of a lack of records. The veterinarian diagnosed Rocky with a life-threatening infection and the turtle died shortly after.

Johnson-Delaney admitted that she only completed boarding logs for one day during the two-week period that Rocky was in her care, according to the documents....

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PRESTIDIGITATION: TROMPE D'OIEL

At my desk in the room between Amanda's and ours, I sit and look at all the files.

Opened in front of me, there's a notice from the car loan bank, saying that we're eighty days behind, facing repossession. It only takes eighty days to lose everything

we've paid on that car? It's a Toyota that we bought used for thirteen thousand dollars,

and now we have four hundred left to pay, plus the five hundred that's overdue. They say they'll repossess it and sell it at auction if we don't pay by Friday. *Friday?* Why didn't they call to let me know? Why didn't they send a letter? I look at the stack of unopened envelopes in the desk, piled in one of the cubbies— Notices I haven't been able to face—and I know it was probably in there, with the gas bill, and the notices from the mortgage. We owe another two thousand for the doctors this month. What Medicaid won't cover, unless we move her to a state hospital. She was on the waitlist for that place in Maynard, and we thought about it. We visited. But those hospitals are grim, with dark hallways and chipping floor tiles. Nothing's been updated since the seventies or eighties, and even the machines look outdated and run-down. Everything is functional, they said when I asked, just a little slower. Their CT scan, for example, took longer than the most recent machines, but it provided exactly the same images. I glanced into the patients' rooms, four to a room with curtains pulled between when they were sleeping. A mother spooned rice from a Tupperware container into a young man's partially-toothed mouth. I couldn't bear it.

Last spring, just before my father died, we said: What if she comes home? We looked into it, talked to all the nurses and doctors, asked what it would cost to have the nurses come to us, to have her therapies done here. We would renovate the den, the unmade room to the right, on the other side of the stairs. What was meant to be our den would become Mary's room. I could do some of the physical therapy myself. I could spend all day with her.

How much?

Too much. Tens of thousands of dollars too much.

We are barely getting by now. Dr. Smalls is right, I know, but moving Mary to a nursing home means giving up on her. I won't do that.

The day we went for our second mortgage: Last November. We walked into the bank, and they said that in the year and four months since we bought the house, it had gained seventy-five thousand dollars in value. My parents had already remortgaged their house, that first year, in February.

Now us.

Thanks to all the people coming in, the bedroom community we'd become, the Boston commuters, the old orchards bought up and developed, the great plastic-sided houses, the farms turned into sub-developments—thanks to them, Jeannie's husband has work, Danielle's orchard is in business, and we could afford to get Mary to the rehab place in town, in Bolton. Because it was second best to bringing her home. We would be right here. So close. We could bring her home for weekends, on holidays. We could visit anytime.

We walked into the bank with Amanda on my hip. I thought I might throw up. Gerald looked wan. He was pale. He was sweating a little. I touched his forehead to see if he had a fever. No. He was clammy, his whole body. How will we pay this back? we said before we went in.

But what choice did we have?

My teaching salary, my work at the orchard in the summertime, his salary at Blanchard College, not even tenured yet, and there were rumors the college finances weren't good. No guarantees for any of this. Walking on thin ice, said my father last April, before he died. He said we were all walking on thin ice.

We went to the bank next to the Colonial Store, walked up the three wooden steps, the same steps Mary walked down the last time I saw her well. We walked into the bank and sat down with Melissa Trust, Millie's mother, and we took out that second mortgage. Signed for it fast on the line. First Gerald, then me. Dating it. Amanda sat in my lap, grabbing for the pen. Everything was for her mouth then. She was a plump six month old, about to start teething. Melissa dangled her keys in the air above the desk while we signed. *Amanda*, she said, *Look at this!* And she made her eyes big and Amanda laughed and reached for the keys.

Seventy-five thousand three hundred eighty-two dollars. Into our savings account, linked to checking, and eeking out month by month for Mary's care.

Melissa walked us out, opened the door for us, wearing a black suit, her hair all pulled back. I was in jeans. I'd just gotten home from teaching and changed right away. Gerald came home from Worcester early. We had this appointment, and here we were. Melissa touched my shoulder and said, *Things will work out.*

"Thanks," I said.

I put Amanda into her carseat, and Gerald and I just sat in the car for awhile. Not saying anything. He stared straight ahead, over the steering wheel, and we watched the cars go by on one-seventeen.

"Well," he said.

"Well," I said.

I sighed.

"Thank you," Gerald, "for doing all this."

He turned and looked at me.

“I know it isn’t easy,” I said.

He grinned.

“Oh,” he said, “anything for you, Junie.”

I knew he meant it as a joke, that it was supposed to lighten things up, but he smiled this sad smile. And Amanda shrieked in the backseat, hungry again. She was eating carrots and peas and all her baby-food vegetables by then.

He started the car and backed up and we drove home. There was something final about that moment, as if we’d entered some other kind of phase. A new version of our lives together. I thought I was imagining it, that it wasn’t as bad as I thought, that I was just scared because we owed all that money now, and if the market went down, if one of us lost our jobs, if anything happened.

But I wasn’t imagining. Things began to change.

For the rest of that week, he stayed late at work. He left at six am and came back at eight or nine. He said he was working on something with Nadine, his book idea, that she was helping him. He needed the book to get tenure, he said. He was going to really start focusing now.

“It’s what we need,” he said.

“Is it?”

“Junie,” he said, “Look at what we just did. *Yes*, it’s what we need.”

And I couldn’t argue with him, because he had already done so much. For me. All of this for me. And the tone of his voice when he said, *Anything for you, Junie*. Not a joking tone, no lightness to it. It came out with an acrid tinge, even though I

know he did not mean for it. It came out all slanted and tired. Not angry. Not yet angry. But the hint of resentment was there, growing underneath the love.

*

MEDICAL TOXICOLOGY OF DRUG ABUSE

Sevoflurane: Identifying Characteristics: Sevoflurane is a methyl isopropyl ether anesthetic that is poorly soluble in blood. This volatile anesthetic has a less pungent odor and less airway irritation than other halogenated anesthetics....Exposure: Like isoflurane, sevoflurane is a reinforcer in volunteer studies: this anesthetic produces abuse liability-related subjective (ie., pleasant, psychedelic-like, euphoria) effects in some individuals....

Volunteers? Did they ask people to inhale it and then ask them to describe how it felt? That sounds ridiculous. Did the ad say, *Seeking volunteers to get high*? I turn back to the computer. I keep on researching. Type in: Veterinarians addicted, or veterinarian drug abuse, or veterinarian stealing drugs. I read, and read, and read, trying to understand what Mary was doing, and why—will we ever know why?

*

QUESTIONING

“I wouldn’t even be here,” says Michael Barrone at the orchard that afternoon, “but I have to investigate Bess Morgan’s accusations. And they found a screwdriver and a

bike from your place at the Toy Shop. The bike was outside on the sidewalk, and the screwdriver was by the cash register. Someone was trying to crack open the register. So, I have to look into it.”

I think of how Danielle meticulously labels all of her tools, how each one has its place in the shed. And—then, the flash—Romero using it to put in the air conditioner. I remember noticing the label on the screwdriver, in his back pocket, and wondering why Danielle labels every single tool, and wishing, now, that she didn’t.

“You’re kidding me, right, Mike?” says Danielle. No one else calls him Mike. “This is bullshit and you know it. These guys would never vandalize a store. You know who it is.”

Carla and Bruce stand beside her, watching.

“Go get the raspberries and kale!” she shouts to them. They skitter out. “You can’t question them,” she says. “I won’t have it.”

“Danielle. This is my job. I have to, no matter what I think about it.”

He glances at me. “Junie,” he says, with a nod.

Danielle crosses her arms.

“Do you have a warrant?”

He shakes his head and leans in. “A warrant? I’m not searching the place.”

“Well, without a warrant, you can’t come onto my property.”

She’s turning red. She’s uncertain, reaching for something legal to throw at him.

“Should I get Terence?” I say. The lawyer can solve this.

She shakes her head. “Nope,” she says, without turning back to me. “See you when you have a warrant, Mike.”

“Danielle,” I say, “Michael’s on our side. He just has to—”

“No, Junie,” she says, and her voice is cold. She won’t look at me.

Michael sighs and closes his eyes, then opens them and stares at her.

“If this is how you want to do it, Danielle, this is how we’ll do it. I’ll slap obstruction of justice on you, too—that sound good?”

“Wonderful,” she says.

Michael Barrone says, “Great,” under his breath as he turns and walks out the big barn doors. We hear his cruiser start and then the tires crunching over gravel as he turns out of the drive.

“What’s wrong with this town?” says Danielle. I know better than to answer now. She turns and walks out the back doors, saying on her way, “Bigots! Racist fuckers!”

But the bike, I think. What about that bike? That Bruce was riding in the field that day. Wasn’t that the bike he took the week before? One of Danielle’s?

Maybe this is all Bruce and his friends.

“Dan,” I say. “I think I know—”

She turns to me, all fury.

“What?” she says, as if it’s me she despises.

And then—it will be, if I tell. If I tell on Bruce, won’t he tell what he saw? Of me and Tony, that day?

“I don’t know,” I say. “Nothing.”

Instantly, I despise myself, because I realize that I've chosen protecting myself over helping Romero.

ERRANDS

In the early evening, Amanda still at Mrs. McCrae's and Danielle under the impression that I am running errands, Tony and I walk down to the pond together. I tell him about the case against Romero that Mike's building, and how Bruce might have done it. But how Bruce knows about us.

"Does he?" says Tony. "He just rode by that night. He probably didn't even see us."

"He did," I say.

Our eyes met. It was dusk, and his face was darkened, but when he turned to me, our eyes met. I know he saw me.

"Try not to worry about it," he says. "I don't think we're in trouble here."

He changes the subject, and we talk about Dom. And Paulina Chepeski, who lived down the dirt road near the pond, and Mary and Stella. Talk about his mother, who's happy to go to her sister's but sad to leave this place. In two weeks, the movers come, and she'll be on a flight west. Will he leave then? Once she goes? I haven't asked. Her house will be on the market once she's gone. Maybe he'll need to come up to check on it. He'll miss the New England fall and leave Texas for a few weeks in October. I forget everything else that's happening now that I'm with Tony—the financial worries, the problems with Gerald, Mary's secrets, the orchard troubles.

"How did you start selling insurance, anyway?"

He laughs. Green eyes crinkling up. Those cheekbones.

We face each other. He looks down at me. As if he's about to answer, he looks down at me. But then he takes my hands in his, very very gently, almost not-touching. Fingertips grazing.

This is not how I am, I think—Mary is the one with all the boyfriends, Mary is the one, it has always been me and Gerald, always us. I cannot do this to him. I cannot.

“I love your short hair,” he says.

I turn away from Tony. His hand against my hand.

But there is this long silence between me and Gerald, a long silence in the world—I have been alone for so long. I am so tired of being alone. This summer, even, that meeting with Dr. Smalls, he did not come along with me, and his secret talks with Stella about getting me away from here. He has not been there.

Hand against my back, on the waist of my jeans. The only pair I still fit into, still carrying a little baby weight I never lost (stress, says Dr. Smalls when I complain to him). He touches me right there. The trees melt and unravel around us, all those pines slipping into the earth, and the sky sinks a little lower and gathers around our shoulders, and the air untangles—all of it, everything, untangled. My whole life. And then I zoom out again, and pull away.

I remember, now, I was supposed to be helping Danielle. I forgot—I was supposed to help her make those deliveries. I look at my watch. Eight o'clock. Too late now.

Tony's smiling.

I shake my head. “No,” I say. I don’t look up at him. I turn away, and walk to the car, and leave him there, without even worrying about how he’ll get home. I drive to get Amanda at Mrs. McCrae’s. She wasn’t expecting to have her this late. She’ll be exhausted—they’ll both be exhausted. I drive down the wooded roads, the trees falling in, the light sinking, sinking, making me strain to see. It takes ten minutes before I remember to turn on the headlights, and then the rush of what I’m doing falls on me: at the pond with Tony, forgetting Danielle, leaving Amanda with Mrs. McCrae, driving in a panic back to town, through these woods. I press on the brake. I slow. I stop. I roll down the window and listen to the crickets and cicadas and frogs—everything a loud hum now that it’s July. I love that bug roar; it only happens exactly this way here, in this swampy land. That’s one thing I love about Bolton. Its animal sounds.

MAGIC. PRESTIDIGITATION. LA MAGIQUE.

It’s the fourth of July. We left before the fireworks. Gerald and I didn’t feel like going at all, but Danielle kept asking if we’d be there. And I wanted to see if Tony might be, is the truth, to tell him Alan Ball called.

Amanda came home from the picnic with a balloon hat, a little daschsund to wear on her head. He was made of green and yellow balloons, and she named him

Bon-bon. She kept touching him with one hand while she ran from group to group to show them her hat. See Bon Bon? she'd say, and wait for the compliment, and then run to the next group.

The magician stood under the white tent, in one corner, twisting balloons into shapes for the children. Gerald and I talked to Danielle and Terence. Everyone says, "Oh, your hair!" and looks around my head, and studies me, and then says, "I like it." I feel metamorphosed.

Jeannie says, watching the magician, "Will you look at him? He's fast."

And he is. He can make a bicycle in under a minute. The children watch him with their hands pressed together, jumping, impatient for the shape he'll hand to them.

His face is painted white, his cheeks in round red circles, his eyes outlined in blue, with fat blue tears dripping down one cheek. He wears a floppy green felt hat, which is pilling on one side, and baggy red pants with suspenders. A red and white striped shirt. And, rather than funny clown shoes, work boots.

"Who is he?" I say.

Gerald shrugs. "Not from here," he says.

I stare at the clown's feet, the only part of him that's undisguised, like some clue to his real life. He wears white gloves on his hands, and the fingertips are smudged black. From touching all those balloons? From running his hands along the tops of dressers to check for dust in his day job? The clown is a butler in real life. The clown jackhammers cement in real life. The clown builds houses.

At the edge of the crowd, behind the clown and all the children, I see Tony, talking to Fred Buchard. Tony's hands are in his pockets.

A flip and jump. The splash that follows.

I look at Gerald. I look back at Tony.

Jeannie says, “Ha ha! A parrot! Will you look at that?”

And the clown hands a red and yellow and green feathered bird to Bill Henn, who is four, and runs away squealing, to show his father.

I look back at Fred, and Tony is gone. Where? Not in any of the other circles. Not at the food table behind me. Not near the clown. Or the barbeques set up just outside the tent, where three men flip burgers in aprons their wives decorated for them (their yearly joke) – bubbly painted words that say *Barbeque Hero*, and *King of the Pigs*.

Where?

Jeannie looks at me. Crosses her arms. Sensing trouble. Always waiting for some gossip.

“I’m starving,” I say. “You want a burger?”

“Sure,” says Gerald. “I’m going to say hi to Danielle and Terence.”

“Okay,” I say. I avoid Danielle, unwilling to face her dismay right now. I should have helped with CSA deliveries yesterday, and I forgot. Because of Tony. Does she know? Has she figured this out?

At the far end of the yard, I see Carla and Bruce, holding hands. So they’re certain of their love now. I should go over and say hi, make nice, suss things out: What does he know? I could ask questions until I know.

We both walk away, leaving Jeannie there. “None for me, thanks, Gerry!” she says. Gerald hates being called Gerry but she never remembers.

“Oh, sorry, Jeannie,” I say. “You want one?”

She smiles. “Sure.”

She crosses her arms again and watches the magician as we walk, chattering about the orchard and the party she went to at Gloria’s house the other night—Gloria is one of the new women—and how the whole house is so beautifully *coordinated*.

I let her chatter fade into background. The whole way to the barbeques, I look for him. I turn and look down the road. But he is nowhere. He is gone. *Disparu*.

The Jamaicans stand in a cluster by the barbeques, chatting together. The townspeople don’t mix with the Jamaicans, which is strange—as if we’re segregated. Omar waves hello, and Jeannie and I walk to say hi.

“Have you tried the ice cream yet?” he says. He grins and gestures to the table, where a bowl of ice cream sits in a bigger bowl of ice. It’s a tangerine color, with melting edges.

“Oh, that looks delicious,” says Jeannie. “You made it?”

He nods.

“I wish Ed would get more productive in the kitchen,” she says, still looking at the ice cream. “Ed stayed home today.” She looks up at Omar. I think, ‘probably to drink on the porch.’

Romero and the newer workers are talking in a circle, holding red plastic cups, laughing.

“Everyone’s made friends,” I say.

Omar shrugs. “Can’t sleep together in those bunks and keep on hating each other. We just wish Danielle had talked to us about it, you know?”

I cross my arms and nod. “You should tell her that. She should know.”

Jeannie goes to the table and scoops out two bowls of ice cream, one for me and one for her. She hands me the plastic bowl, cool on the bottom, and takes a bite.

“Mmmm!” she says, as if exaggerating. “Mmm, my god, this is good!”

Omar nods. “Cardamom,” he says. “That’s the secret.”

I take a bite, and the cool slides over my tongue, into my throat, soothing in the heat. It’s sweet and creamy mango with a tang, a twist of spice.

“Any word from the doctors yet?” I say.

He shakes his head. His hands are deep in his pockets, his back a little slouched. He’s six foot four and even at a slouch, he towers over me.

“Not yet. They say this week sometime.”

“Try the ice cream, everyone!” Jeannie says, hollering to the crowd. She raises her cup and nods. “Delicious!”

Everyone looks at her and then goes back to talking. No one else comes over to try it, or to talk. I hear someone say, ‘All these thefts,’ and I wonder if people are believing Mr. Heinz? Is that what’s happening? It’s teenagers doing the stealing, not the workers. Do they believe that old bigot?

I look around at them all, in their circles and clusters, and I wonder how they can fall for this sort of lie, and turn their backs on someone who’s been in their town for almost twenty years, every summer, climbing ladders, plucking apples gently, dropping them into the bag, gently, leaving the bud beside the fruit so the apples will come again, more—hauling the bags down. Tons of apples each season. The old phrase “One bad apple spoils the bunch” is true—one apple picked with the stem and

leaves will make the whole barrel rot. Omar and Romero have a skill that none of us has, and the endurance to work in the hot summer that none of us has. They've seen my family change, and taken care of Danielle's. After Mary's accident that September, Omar and Romero made enough dinners for me and my parents for a week—roasted chicken, brown chicken stew, fried fish and collared greens—and had Danielle drop them at my parents' house. And now the people in this town are turning their backs on him—subtle, quiet, this insistent act.

Omar's ice cream is getting soupier on the table. I watch it melt, sorrowful.

“Guess everyone's full,” he says.

I think of his bike ride into town in the early morning, sweat marking his shoulders from the ride back up Waddaquadock Hill to the orchard, and the six dollar cardamom. What's wrong with Bolton this summer? Has this racism always been there, just buried deep and waiting for an excuse to emerge?

“Let's put it in the freezer in the barn,” I say, “and save it for later this week.”

Jeannie shakes her head, “They're missing out,” she says, and goes back into the crowd, to talk to some of the new people. I hear her say that the coyotes ate all her raspberries this week. She's trying to get everyone hunting, while Danielle's been lobbying to get the coyote hunting rights banned in Massachusetts. Ed's been talking about buying a rifle so he can get the coyotes this fall. I roll my eyes. Omar carries the bowls to the barn, and I follow.

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WOMAN ACCUSED OF STEALING OVER \$50,000 WORTH OF DRUGS

Authorities are trying to track down a Rogers County woman wanted for stealing more than \$50,000 worth of painkillers....from the veterinary clinic where she worked. She's on the run and faces 59 drug charges.

Amanda Limmer was in charge of ordering, unpacking, and stocking all the prescription medicine at Catoosa Small Animal Hospital. ...Limmer used that cover to steal 11,000 pills and 2 ½ gallons of hydrocodone syrup. "She had free reign to do whatever she wanted, so there was no system of checks and balances in place to stop this from occurring," said Fullerton. Court documents state Limmer ordered extra pills for her and never entered them into the clinic's inventory.

Investigators traced her actions back to October 2009 and said they believe she stopped in July 2011, only because she was fired for falsifying her timesheet. The worker who replaced Limmer noticed odd dosing amounts on previous orders and the clinic notified authorities.

"It's one of the larger ones. I've had some more that were larger in scale, over a shorter period of time, but this one went quite a while before it was detected," Fullerton said.

Limmer is accused of stealing hydrocodone, oxycontin, and some benzodiazepines... [which] go for \$3 to \$5 per pill on the street. They say 11,000 pills could bring in as much as \$55,000. An arrest warrant has been issued for Limmer but investigators believe the drugs are long gone....

*

IN THE BLACK NIGHT

He went to work after the picnic. We left before the fireworks; Terence goes to New Hampshire every year to buy sparklers and enough fireworks for a ten minute display, and sets them off himself from the orchard, up the hill so everyone can see. We came

back home to a silent house and Simon waiting at the door, and then he said he'd go work on the book, and he was gone for hours. I baked pies to fill the time, covering the tiny kitchen floor in powder, filling the house with the smell of hot sweet blueberry.

Now, I hear him sigh as he walks into the bathroom. Amanda went to sleep at eight, woke up once in search of water, and then went back to sleep. I read a book until I couldn't keep my eyes open, trying not to imagine Gerald and Nadine cozy in his office, her purring over his book manuscript. That's not how it is, I tell myself, over and over. I called Danielle at ten, asked her again how many pies she needed, even though I knew, and had finished them. They were cooling on the counter on metal racks, all ready for this weekend's wedding.

He sighs and rubs his back. I open my eyes and watch him flick on the light, his back to me, one hand against his back.

He groans a little. Closes the door.

I hear the sound of water running, him brushing his teeth, the clank of the toothbrush in the cup, a routine I know as well as I know my own. He's looking at himself in the mirror now, rubbing his cheeks dry with the towel.

He turns, opens the door, and walks to the closet to change into his pajamas.

"I missed you," I whisper.

He turns back to me. "Hm?"

"I missed you."

"Working late, you know," he mumbles, and goes back to the closet.

"Has it always been like this, Ger?"

"Hunh?" he calls.

“This town?”

He takes a long time changing, the slide of cloth against cloth, a belt clanging as he takes off his pants and folds them up.

I say, louder: “Has this town always been racist?”

“It’s colonial New England, June.”

“That’s a yes?”

“When settlers came, they killed whole Native American villages, and enslaved some of them to build the stone walls that you love to see running through the woods.”

“You think I romanticize it?”

He sighs. I hear a shirt pulled down over his head, his voice muffled for a moment. “Everyone does,” he says. “In the early nineteenth hundreds, we started looking back at the colonial era with nostalgia, and everyone restored their old houses and started historical societies. That’s how it goes.”

I don’t say that it sounds like he’s lecturing in class. I let him talk. He loves to talk about the history of the town, and finally, he’s talking to me again, a little easier. He pulls on pants, groaning. His shoulder must ache. The old baseball injury.

“Don’t you remember what happened when we were little, with the Singhs?” he says.

I shake my head and stare at the red tulip near the border of the quilt. “No,” I say. “What?” I pull the tulip close to my face so that I can see all the tiny white stitches that keep it attached to the top; this is appliqué, my mother told me. It’s made by layering small pieces of fabric on top of a base, making pictures.

“When they first moved into the neighborhood, people were upset. They didn’t like it. They had three of their first floor windows shattered by rocks the first week, and the older boy was hurt.”

“Really? I don’t remember that.”

“Of course,” he says, shuffling something around in the closet, “selective memory. We un-remember the unpleasant stuff, or we don’t even see it in the first place.”

Another lecture. But it’s better than silence. I stifle my annoyance and let him talk.

“They left their outside lights on all the time, all night, after that, and kept the inside dark. Some of the kids said they got cameras for the house, but I think that was just sensationalism.”

“Yeah, that’s right” I say. “I remember their lights were always on. It looked mysterious inside the house because it was dark in there and bright outside at night.”

“And remember the year that Brian Jones got harassed? At the high school?”

I feel like a fool. Have I convinced myself that Bolton is a bucolic, boring town and missed all of these problems and complexities? How could I not have seen it?

Gerald goes on, “There was a new crew of kids who came in sophomore year, three friends, the found later, and they were part of some neo-white-supremacy thing, and they keyed his car and slashed his tires, and pounded in his locker and at the end of the year, right before they were caught, they set fire to that church in Hudson.”

“The black Baptist church. I remember that.”

“Yup. Same kids.” He pauses.

I twirl a loose piece of thread from the edge of the quilt, wrapping it around my finger over and over until my fingertip goes purple. Then I release it, watch my finger go pale with the return of circulation, and do it again.

“Those are the kids who drove off that cliff up by the old quarry,” he says.
“The next year.”

And then, it strikes me, that memory—the three boys who died when they sailed over the edge of the quarry, into the rocks far below. Their car in flames, their bodies charred. Kids talked about that in school for weeks, and my parents were stunned and terrified that such a thing could happen here, in Bolton, “in this safe town,” they said.

I drop my hands onto the quilt.

“And last year, when the Bruins lost to the Canadiens, and it was a black player who scored the winning goal,” he goes on.

“I remember *that*,” I say. “Those racist Facebook posts and the riot in Boston.”

“Not quite a riot,” he says. “But, right, they blew out a store window after the game, and there were some arrests.”

I let him correct me. He’s been like this lately, persnickety, needing to have the last word, to be the one who’s *right*.

“You know, Ger,” I say, “Danielle didn’t even ask if they wanted help this year.”

“Who?”

“Omar and Romero and the pickers. She just brought in more workers, and now Omar and the old crew get less time. They’re upset about it.”

“Does that surprise you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

There’s the sound of hangers moving on the rack. He’s folding his pants and hanging them again. He’s always been tidy. He likes them to hold the crease down the center of each leg.

“Nothing. Just that she’s bull-headed. She doesn’t always think before she does things. And she’s from an old farming family.”

“She’s still liberal, though.”

“Yeah.” He pauses, the slide of hangers on metal. “But she’s never left Bolton. She went to college in western Mass. This is all she knows.”

He’s still doing something in the closet. I don’t know what. Rearranging his shoes, maybe. Restacking his sweaters.

“I don’t think she’s racist. She’s roaring about the investigation of the workers.”

“What investigation?”

“Where have you been? Michael Barrone is investigating the workers in the Toy Shop theft.”

“Theft? I thought nothing was taken.”

“Well, right. The vandalism. They couldn’t get into the safe. But I guess they found a screwdriver with the McNally Orchards label on it, and one of the orchard’s bikes, so—”

“So they think it was Omar and Romero?”

“Or the new guys, I don’t know.”

“Jesus,” he says. “I’ll have to tell Nadine. She knows some lawyers who could help, if it comes to that.”

I cringe at the mention of her name, but I don’t say anything. I slide down onto the bed so my back is flat, then bend my knees up towards my chest and hold them until my low back releases.

“Well. I didn’t mean that Danielle’s racist. That’s not what I’m saying.”

“Then what *are* you saying?” I hold my knees and roll my body side to side.

“Don’t get upset,” he says. “I’m just saying she doesn’t always think things through.”

Nadine noticed at the town meeting that she’s—”

Jesus. Second mention of her name. I lower my feet back to the bed.

“Nadine noticed?”

“Okay, nevermind.” He sighs. “God forbid I say my colleague’s name.”

And here we are, back again to where we’ve been stuck. I don’t want to fight now,

though. I just want to sleep. I lean over to my bedside table and turn off the lamp.

Slide deeper beneath the quilt, roll to face the windows, and close my eyes.

“You didn’t put out the trash, did you?” I say.

“Of course I did,” he says. There’s the edge to his voice again.

“We were going to wait until morning,” I say. “To avoid the possums, or raccoons—

whatever’s getting it.”

“It’ll be fine,” he says. That edge in his voice.

I let out a long breath, exhausted. Finally, I hear him emerge and come to bed, feel his

weight on the mattress, the sinking on his side. I pretend that I’m fast asleep.

The next day, Saturday, I work at the orchard, prepping for the next party. I bring all the pies lined up on the back seat of the car, on the floor, in boxes we get from the Colonial Store’s deliveries of canned goods. Danielle is upset because in the last two weeks, the coyotes have gotten a chicken and a lamb.

“Don’t tell anyone,” she says. She doesn’t want word to spread around town. She’s on the coyotes’ side.

“I have to get a better fence, and maybe I’ll leave the dogs out at night.”

“You think your corgis can fight off coyotes?” I laugh.

“Yeah, you may be right,” she says. “They’d make a better meal for the coyotes, hunh?”

“I need to talk to you about the crew,” I say.

She lifts boxes of peas, lettuce, and blueberries, stacking them by the side of the barn. These are for the CSA shareholders. This first year is small, with twenty people buying in, but it will grow year by year, we’re sure.

“Not now, Junie. And don’t think we’re not going to talk about your missing the CSA deliveries.”

She heaves a box onto the back of the pick-up, then walks to the shed for the rest. I grab one of the boxes and my back twinges, a shot of pain into my ass and then down the back of my left leg. Not good.

“I had thirty pounds of cucumbers to be loaded up, and had to get Omar to come back down to help me after they’d gone up for dinner.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” I say. “I forgot.”

I carry the box to the truck bed and heave it up. The truck shakes with the thud. The bed is surrounded by three wooden rails, an old-timey solution to the need for a new vehicle to haul all the CSA food to peoples’ houses.

“You’re awful forgetful this summer,” she says. She raises one eyebrow at me, her investigator look. We used to practice raising one eyebrow at each other when we were children, laughing at the looks on each other’s faces.

Now, she’s distracted with the coyote worry, and the deliveries, and the party that’s here at the orchard today. She’s angry with me. She can’t focus. I can see her mind going in too many directions, with her long to-do list. She hauls the boxes onto the truck—she can carry two at a time—and shouts to one of the teenagers passing by: “Hey, come help with this, please!”

She hands him a box. It’s Ben, from Stowe, who wears a plaid shirt and shorts every day, no matter how hot. He likes the long sleeves so he doesn’t get scratched. Sensitive skin, he tells us.

“My father’s ready to shoot the coyotes,” she says.

Ben sets a box of lettuce on the ground. Its leaves shake.

“So is Jeannie. And all the new people.”

Danielle nods.

“I have to help the crew in the warehouse,” Ben says. “They asked me to bring water.”

“What are you doing here, then?” says Danielle. “Go, go!” She waves him off, and he trots for the barn.

“Can you help me deliver the vegetables tonight? I’m way behind, and Terence can’t get out of work early, and Manuel’s got the flu.”

“Sure.” I stand up straight and rub my back; the left side has been sore for weeks, this one spot right above my hip. “We need to talk about the crew today, okay? Later, I have to run some errands but I’ll come back at five. That good?”

“What errands?”

“Groceries—”

Bruce walks out of the barn and stands beside us, tying his apron behind his back. His face is flushed and he’s scowling.

He sighs loudly.

“If you’ve got something to say,” says Danielle, “then say it.”

“Forget it,” he says, and shakes his head.

“Bruce,” I say. I grab his arm as he turns away. “She means, ‘What’s bothering you? How can we help?’”

He twists his earring and squints at the maple tree behind us.

“Uh.”

Danielle and I wait. She’s a little out of breath, and leans on the truck bed.

“Okay,” he says, “Carla’s mad at me.” One half of his mouth pulls up, a grimace.

“Okay,” I say.

“And I don’t know why.”

He scratches the back of his neck and looks down at the ground. He’s anxious, more tender than I thought.

“Did you do something to hurt her feelings?”

“No. I don’t know. I—”

He keeps looking down, shifts on his feet, looks back up, at me. “She wanted me to say she’s my girlfriend?”

I nod. Oh, Bruce. Young Bruce.

“And, you didn’t want to,” I say.

“Yeah, and it was in front of everyone—like, *everyone*.”

Danielle laughs, her big loud laugh, and I see Bruce wince.

“Danielle,” I say.

She ignores me.

“You’re in for a bruising now, Bruce.” She pulls her hair back into a ponytail. “You’ve gotta call her your girlfriend if you want to keep walking around here with your hands in each other’s pockets.”

He shifts from foot to foot.

“They’re all gonna make fun of me.”

He means the local crew of high school and college boys who work here now, and the carful of kids who pick him up each night—the Brodie twins and Mark

Pointer, boys who make trouble in town, maybe even the ones doing all these pranks and thefts this summer, though Bruce swears he's not part of it.

"Well," says Danielle, "they all wish they could put their hands in someone's back pocket, too."

Danielle's father scuffles up from behind the barn and says, "Danielle, there's a couple waiting in the gazebo for the wine tasting—"

"I'll get it," I say, and leave Danielle to give Bruce her advice.

"Dad, what's wrong?" says Danielle. "I thought you were going to stay down at the house today? Junie!" she hollers to me. "You're on wedding prep this afternoon, right?"

I give her a thumbs up and shout back, "On it! Promise!"

Mr. McNally grumbles some reply. He gets angry about how Danielle does things at the orchard, and comes up to try to make it right, the way he would have—used to—do it. "All these changes," he says, "are going to break us."

After lunch, Danielle, Carla, Bruce, and I are sitting behind the shop on a bench against the outside wall. Omar and Romero come down from the orchard to have some pie. Danielle insisted.

"Where's everyone else?" Danielle says when she sees them.

Romero shrugs. "They don't like pie, I guess."

I wonder if this has to do with the disagreement, about bringing more workers without asking the old crew first.

"They think we're your favorites," says Omar. He winks. "They're jealous."

Danielle laughs, but I think there's some truth in what he's saying.

"Blueberry, raspberry, or strawberry rhubarb?" says Bruce. He's acting much more grown-up since the boyfriend-girlfriend resolution two hours earlier. He's suddenly playing adult, preening for Carla. I wonder what Danielle said to him.

Omar and Romero both have strawberry rhubarb and sit on either end of the bench. And it's then that we hear Michael Barrone's voice inside the barn, echoing: "Danielle? Danielle! You here?"

"Uh oh," I say.

Omar leans forward. "Who is it?" he asks me.

"Michael, the cop," I say.

Danielle purses her lips. "No problem. I'll take care of it." She sets down her plate on the ground, and immediately, Pluto, one of the corgis, rushes in to eat it. We let him.

"This is about the break-in?" says Romero. "They're accusing us."

I nod. "It looks like it. But don't worry, Danielle and Terence will protect you."

Omar scoffs. "They can try," he says.

"You don't think they can help?" says Carla. She's holding her plate in both hands, white plastic smeared with blue.

"If the town's made up its mind, it's made up its mind," says Omar.

Romero shakes his head. "I don't know," he says, "I think it'll be fine. We're in good hands."

"Commie bastards," says Bruce.

“Bruce!” I say. “What are you talking about?”

“The pigs! The cops! They’re all commie bastards.”

This is his father talking, and the polite veil that’s been up for the last hour is gone again, revealing a young kid who only knows how to parrot what his father tells him. It’s how they all are, in my classrooms at the high school, and they won’t begin to change until they get to college.

“Let’s just wait and see what happens,” I say to Bruce, putting on my teacher voice. “Try to stay calm.”

We can hear Danielle and Michael talking inside, the up and down of their language but not their words. The sky is clouding over, and now a light rain starts. Their voices are drowned out by the sound of the truck approaching, two of the new crewmen driving, Vance and Claude.

“You ready to go?” Claude, at the wheel, says to Omar and Romero. “We can finish up the lower stand of plum trees before it pours.”

“There’s a storm coming?” I say.

Claude nods. “Here already,” he says.

Romero and Omar stand up reluctantly. Omar glances back to the barn, as if he expects Danielle and Michael to emerge and drag him away from here.

“We’ll let you know what happens,” I say. “As soon as we know.”

He nods. They drop their dishes by Pluto, who starts in on them right away, and then they jump into the back of the truck. There’s a squeak and grind as the truck goes into gear. And as Claude pulls away and Omar and Romero face us, there’s so

much sorrow in their faces, their legs dangling, each with a hand holding the side of the truck.

Once the truck disappears and its sound fades out, Danielle comes out back, and Michael's with her.

"He's going to interview the crew," she says. "Soon as they break for the day."

She crosses her arms and looks up at the orchard, watching the hill arch against the sky. I can see that she's furious. Her whole face and neck are red, and she's squinting her eyes into the drizzle. Her blue plaid shirt, torn along the hem, is unbuttoned at her neck, but she doesn't seem to feel the cold.

"I'm sorry to have to do this," says Michael to us, on the bench. "You kids should know, I'm just following due process. You know what that means?"

"Accusing innocent people," says Bruce.

Michael shakes his head and gestures to Danielle. "You're spending too much time around this one."

She ignores him.

"Following the rules," Michael says. "Giving everyone a chance to speak. Looking into every unlikely corner."

He gave her that, at least, the "unlikely."

"Let's get back to work," I say to Bruce and Carla. "C'mon. I need your help stacking cucumbers and cabbage."

They follow me into the barn, and we leave Danielle and Michael outside, in the rain, to do what he says he has to do.

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ALAN BALL

It's been two weeks, and if I had his email address, I'd write to him, and say: Soon, I'll be back in touch. Just not yet. I don't want to think about how bad it was. I don't want to imagine that the police were right—that it might have been on purpose, hitting the tree that day. I don't want to think that we missed *that* sign, on top of all the others. That it was that bad. That I'm keeping her here now, in this state, when she was trying to get out of this world altogether. That can't be the truth.

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DRUG ABUSE: Veterinary medicine is the only medical specialty with no established programs for monitoring and treating drug and alcohol abuse—despite evidence that medical professionals are statistically at higher risk for addictive problems.

“Veterinarians in need of assistance fear losing their license and the stigma attached to suffering from an addiction or a mental issue,” according to Jeff Hall, DVM, a recovering addict and former chair of the Wellness Committee of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AMVA).

*

TONY'S OLD SAAB

Green, and in the middle of the parking lot at the Country Store. Maybe he is eating breakfast at the counter. Spooning eggs into his mouth. Maybe he is getting his haircut at the salon – the only place in town that cuts hair so all the men go, too. Maybe he is talking to Victor White in his real estate office upstairs, reliving old times while the rain pounds the roof of the building, making nice nostalgic sounds.

Tony was wild in high school. He drank, smoked pot at lunchtime on the hill behind the school, went out with the ecstasy-kids on weekends. We weren't friends then, except that one time in the woods, when we ran into each other and it just happened. Usually, we weren't friends after that day in the snow when I betrayed him in front of his friends. We had found a page from a catalogue advertising bras, in front of the old nun's house, and Tony wanted me to tell his friends about it. I refused, and told them he made it all up. I was losing him to them, the boys who called themselves The Circle, and they wouldn't let me play with them. I was trying to keep him for myself, but it backfired. After that, our friendship died. We would walk past each other in high school, and raise our hands, maybe, and that was all.

His green Saab sits there, waiting for him to come back. And I sit there watching it. Waiting, too. For fifteen whole minutes, until I realize it is three o'clock and I had better pick up Amanda and Alice at Mrs. McCrae's. When I left the orchard, it was pouring, and Michael and Danielle were still up at the bunk houses, interviewing the crew.

I start the car. I look for him in the doorway, windshield wipers going fast. I pull out slowly, turn back. I could wait a little longer, I think. I could sit for just a few

more minutes. Tell him I found Alan. He'll be happy for me. He'll want to talk. The talk will feel like a great relief, a burden lifted, to have someone in this with me.

Jeannie pulls into the driveway and as she drives past, she waves at me through the driver's side window. Smiles an exaggerated smile—the muscles in her cheeks straining to make it look real. I smile back and wave, and keep on pulling out, as if I was already on my way.

WELL

When I pull into Terence and Danielle's house, Terence is on his way out the door, putting on his coat.

“On my way up to help,” he says. “Michael's questioning the crew?”

“He came by this afternoon. They're still up there? It's been two hours.”

Terence shakes his head. “Sounds like they're almost done. She should have called me at work and had me come home for this.”

“I think she was just stunned,” I say, “that she didn't win and keep Michael away.”

He shuts the door behind him and pulls the hood over his head. Walks to his car. “Can you keep Alice for awhile?”

“Sure,” I say. “No problem.”

“Great,” he says, and jumps into his car and pulls out.

I get back into my car, Alice and Amanda in their seats in back.

“Where'd Daddy go?” says Alice. “I wanna go with Daddy.”

“Sorry, sweetie. There's work to do. We'll go do something fun.”

“Nooooo,” she says. I turn on *Free to Be You and Me*, and try to cajole her into singing along, but like Danielle, she’s stubborn, and won’t forget what she wants. She whines and fusses the whole way home.

Back home, wet coats in the entryway and Simon’s wiggling body weaving between us, the phone rings. Tony. He wants to see my mother. They ran into each other at the store this weekend, and she said, *Come by and see me*. Will I meet him there? To make her happy? I look down at the girls. Think of Simon who needs a walk. I shouldn’t go.

“Yes,” I say. To make her happy. That’s the reason. I haven’t seen her all week.

“Want to go see Grandma, girls?” I say.

They whine and fall down on the floor. “Nooooo,” says Alice. “I want to stay *here*.”

“What if we stop for a donut on the way?”

A good old-fashioned bribe.

She looks at me, thinking. “Okay,” she says, begrunted.

Tony kissed my mother’s cheek, and she told him how good he looked. He said, “You’re beautiful as ever, Mrs. Roe,” and she laughed and shook her hand at him.

“Oh, Tony, you were always such a charmer.”

I could tell she was flattered. She’d put on her old blue jumper with a white t-shirt and her clogs—the outfit for him. I was invisible with them, just like when we

were little—Tony could always woo my parents. The son they never had. The one Mary always strove to replace—just as good, her life seemed to say, as any boy: perfect grades, perfect career, athletic, strong, and beautiful, as well, a beauty she never acknowledged but used to her benefit, smitten boys in her hip pocket.

My father wished Tony and I would get married. He'd say, in the months before I was to marry Gerald, What about Tony? You still in touch with him? My father always wished I'd have some last-minute change of heart.

We sat down in the living room. My mother gave Alice and Amanda a cookie each, and Alice pulled Amanda downstairs to the playroom, where a pile of our childhood toys awaited them—legos, a bouncy ball, linkin logs, some stuffed animals.

My mother made tea for us. Her shop was closed, sold to someone the first year after Mary's accident, just before my father died. Now it was a health food and organic grocery store, owned by a woman who lived in Stow. My mother wouldn't go inside. They hadn't made as much as they thought they would in the sale, and she regretted it. Said with the way the town's growing now, she could have done really well.

I poured tea for each of us. Handed around the plate of sunflower seed cookies, little bite-sized cookies my mother loves.

“Tell me how Dom is, Tony. Doris tells me he's having a hard time.”

Tony nods and chews his cookie.

“Since the divorce, yeah, it's been tough for him. For my mother, too. They're both kind of in the same boat.”

“I can’t believe your father,” said my mother. But then she stopped. Tony’s father was policeman in Stow, and he’d left Doris because he’d taken a job in North Carolina, on a whim, because he’d met someone online. *On. Line.* said my mother when she heard about it last year. Isn’t that preposterous? What does that even *mean*? I’d shrugged. I guess that’s what happens in the new millennium, I said. It’s only two thousand eight, she said, We’re barely into the new millenium. I laughed.

“Are you still making quilts, Mrs. Roe?”

My mother shook her head. “Not much,” she said. That was always her hobby. One wall of the downstairs playroom is stacked with Tupperware boxes, where her fabric waits, decades worth of saving scraps and shopping when the money was there. She used to make traditional quilts, not like Stella’s landscapes but like the one she made for me and Gerald—hexagons paper pieced one by one by hand, just inches in diameter, and then pieced into grandmother’s flower garden or a central star. Appliqued story quilts for each of our high school graduations, depicting our lives so far—soccer games, girl scouts, our best friends, the Bolton landscape of woods and rolling hills and orchards, trips to the seaside. Windmills. Grandmother’s Fan. Rolling square. Snail’s trail. Moonlight star. Stepping stones. Cathedral windows. Patterns she taught Stella while she stitched in the living room, where Mary and I read. That was on her good days. On bad days, the fabric was untouched. Since our father’s death, she hasn’t quilted at all.

“Have you been to the orchard yet?” she says.

“Soon—I get to work my way in. A little heavy lifting for a wedding next week, and I’ll catch up with Danielle and Terence, Junie and Gerald.”

He looked over at me as he popped a cookie into his mouth. He smiled, satisfied, eyes lit, and I smiled back at him, and then glanced over at my mother, who was watching us.

She raised her eyebrows at me.

I looked into my lap.

“We’d better get home,” I say. “Terence is probably done with the workers.”

“Great,” said Tony, and he nodded and took another big sip of tea.

Tony helped me buckle in Amanda and Alice.

“Here,” said Alice. “We made you pictures.”

She handed him two small scraps of paper with crayon scribbles.

“Beautiful,” he said, “Thank you.”

He climbed into the front seat with me.

“Say something in French,” he says.

He nudges my thigh with his hand and nods his head toward me.

“You remember that?”

“Of course. You were always talking with Danielle’s mom. I took French in middle school so I could speak with you.”

I laugh. “No!”

“True story.” He smiles. “Come on, say something.”

“I’m so rusty.”

“I called Alan Ball,” I say.

He raises his eyebrows. “Ah! Good,” he says. “When will you see him?”

I feel myself blushing. Why am I blushing? Ridiculous. It gets worse, my whole neck heating up. I look into my lap.

“Tuesday.”

“Tomorrow? Want me to come?”

I squint my eyes, thinking, shouldn't it be Gerald who comes with me, why does Gerald never offer, and will people notice us together in public, and Tony laughs.

“Guess not,” he says.

“No, it would be nice but—I'll be okay by myself. Thanks for coming today,” I say. “She was happy to see you.”

“Say that in French.”

He's more playful today, maybe because I am, too. I'm filled with the rush of seeing him, my whole body elevated, ready to spring back with a comment, to banter, to play.

“Why? You're like a twelve year old.”

“I haven't heard you speak it since you were little. Come on.”

I roll my eyes. I used to speak with Danielle's mother, when I was little. My mother wouldn't speak French with me—she was French-Canadian, like Danielle's mother, but she thought it was the language of the peasants. That's what her mother, my grandmother, said, anyway. So I retreated to Danielle's house, all those curtain-drawn afternoons when my mother was sad and stuck in bed, or when my father was angry at nothing, just a tight-wound fury, and I'd speak French with Danielle's mother, and make muffins for breakfast the next day, and curl up with Danielle's

kittens—their cats were always having kittens or bringing home stray friends—and nestle in, safe.

Tony grins, waiting.

“Uch, fine. *Merci pour y aller avec moi.*”

He stares a minute, then smiles, this long slow smile.

“Oh, Junie,” he says. Mocking, the smoky voice as if he is turned on. As if we are in the middle of something. He laughs a little.

“You’re still such a child.” I hit his leg with the back of my hand. “You want to poke fun?”

“Not poking fun,” he says. And he shakes his head and his face goes serious. And he looks at me for a very long time, long enough for me to breathe in and breathe out and know that he is not poking fun, not at all.

I turn away, hands on the wheel. Tell myself: Every danger starts with wanting.

“Tone, I say, it’s getting—”

I turn toward him, but he’s already turning away, pushes the door open fast— creak of rust—and jumps out of the car. My lips graze the current of air he leaves, his sweet ephemeral wake.

The rest of the day, I think of this moment, the touch in the air of Tony. As I’m making a macaroni casserole for dinner (Danielle would be scandalized; she calls my palate Midwestern). As I greet Terence at the door and help him move Alice’s carseat back into his car. As I listen to him groan about Michael Barron’s questioning, “which seemed benign,” he says. “But you never know.” As I’m putting Amanda to bed, three

times, because she keeps emerging from her room. As I'm in bed reading a novel I don't care about, something about a family in Florida. As I think about the bills, and wondering when we'll get the paycheck, thinking: tomorrow, it will be here, and I'll pay the water bill. I fall asleep thinking of Tony, the book against my chest, and wake to Gerald testing the shower in the morning.

"Still no hot?" he says. "I'll call today. I'll shower at the school gym."

His voice is frustration. He'll call today?

I pull the book off my chest, where it's pressed the mark of a corner into my skin.

*

LOOKING AHEAD: HOW DOCTORS DEVELOP A PROGNOSIS, CONT.

- *CT or MRI images of the brain, which can show the extent and type of primary brain damage (localized versus stretch/shear-type injury) and reveal the presence or absence of secondary injuries caused by a lack of blood flow. Such secondary injuries indicate a worse prognosis.*
- *Measurements of pressure inside the skull. Elevated pressure is typically associated with a worse prognosis, especially when sustained.*
- *Measurements of the electrical activity of the brain, such as electroencephalograms (EEGs) or multimodal evoked potentials, which may reveal the degree of damage.*

*Another important measurement is **time**: the longer a person stays in a coma or vegetative state, the worse the likely extent of the damage and, therefore, the worse the overall neurological and functional prognosis.*

*

TETRAULT

Since Tony, I think of her words. *Les Trois Rivieres. Mon pere, Monsieur Chapeau.*

Ma mere, La Reine de la Jeunesse. Words that began her story. It was a memoir. Of

her life in Canada. Living in the town of Three Rivers. On the Saint Lawrence River,

where her uncles raised her and her parents were the ghosts of the town. Mister Hat, my father; The Queen of Youth, my mother. How her parents were known for their rowdy nights. How they died crossing the river on a dare. A stupid way to die, said Magdalene Tetrault. To risk your life on a whim? For pride? Or just to entertain? She did not understand it. She did not understand why they would leave her this way. Even in her fifties, when she wrote her memoir before she died. Even then, she saw this choice as folly. She saw her parents as a little bit foolish. She was still angry. *Quelle betise*, she wrote. What stupidity. Her uncles told stories of her parents, laughing. Sometimes she laughed, too. At the way they caroused around the town. The way her mother laughed as she helped her father make the shoes. Bending the leather and pounding the nails and sewing up the tongues. That was her job, the sewing. Big leather needle. They liked to make jokes. They lived light-hearted. So Magdalene Tetrault spent her life trying to know who they were, and then once she knew, trying to forgive them for it.

ROMERO

In the morning, at seven a.m., Danielle calls. She's sobbing. Danielle never cries.

"They're investigating Romero," she says.

I'm stunned. I look at the clock from my bed. Amanda's slept late.

"Romero?" I sit up.

She sniffs. Cries. "I don't even know—We were exhausted last night, and all morning, we've been talking about it—"

"Terence will fix it," I say. "He knows what to do, right?"

“NO!” she wails. “He says we have to find someone else who can help, because this isn’t his specialty.”

“Why Romero?”

“His fingerprints were on the screwdriver. I told them, it’s from installing the air conditioner in the gazebo. Remember?”

I nod.

“Junie?”

“Yes,” I say. “We’re going to take care of it. We always do. Everything that happens.”

I’m grasping at straws, and she hears it in my voice. I’m no comfort.

“This town has lost its mind,” she says. And she hangs up.

When I get up, Simon follows me downstairs. I let him out back.

“Stay close,” I say.

The screen door creaks and slams shut, there’s a pause of silence, and then Amanda calls in a whine, “Mooooomma!”

The day begins.

There’s a note on the table: *Junie, I paid the water bill. 285 out of our checking account.*

Two eighty-five? The water bill was supposed to be one-fifty. How did it double? It must have been late fees. I’ll call them later.

“Moooooommmaaaa!” louder now.

I go upstairs to get her dressed and ready for Mrs. McCrae's, then off to the orchard, where Danielle is surely stomping around the orchard and working twice as hard to compensate for her helplessness.

*

RABBI RONNIE CAHANA

“We will all have moments of paralysis in our lives.”

His daughter, Evelyn, told me that her father said this, blinking each letter with his eyes. I sit with them sometimes, early mornings before the hustle of the day has begun, and Evelyn and her mother are always there with Ronnie.

Evelyn says that his father believes that his paralysis opened a new awareness for him. He believes that it's his privilege to observe human experience. Last week, he took a breath on his own, released from the breathing tube, and now, she says, he'll learn to speak again.

Their family is full of hope, that rehab room a different space than the one where Mary dwells. Have I done this all wrong? How did they enter this so peacefully? They cry, they get frustrated, but they are also at peace with all of this, because of Ronnie's wisdom. What if I could experience the world—even Mary's accident—with this kind of seeing, with this sort of acceptance? What would become of us then?

*

POUR

“Yes,” I say, “this one is the peach.”

An old woman with a camera around her neck nods. She wears a floral sundress, and her daughter wears a big pink floppy hat made of cotton. Danielle and Terence haven’t been around all morning, but the tension of Michael Barrone’s questioning yesterday is here, in the air, in the way that even Carla and Bruce won’t smile and joke as they work today.

Edgar, one of Danielle’s corgis, here because the air conditioner at their house is broken, wanders into the gazebo and flops down next to the little girl. He groans.

“Grandma, that dog’s growling at me,” she says, and tugs the old woman’s dress. She looks up at me.

“He’s nice,” I say, “don’t worry. He’s just old.”

The old woman tastes the wine and then looks down at Edgar.

I set the wine bottle down and wipe my hand on my apron, wondering where Danielle and Terence are. Carla and Bruce are working the barn with Manuel. In the gazebo, the air conditioner rumbles, blowing us with cool air. I glance up, and Tony (*him!*) is walking past the gazebo with Terence, Terence talking and moving his hands, Tony nodding his head, hands in his pockets. Something inside me leaps, then tumbles down to my knees. I touch the counter with one hand. And then Alice races to catch up with them, carrying a stick in her hand. Will Alice say anything about yesterday? Will she let Terence know we were with Tony at my mother’s house?

The old woman laughs at Edgar and says to her granddaughter, who is hiding behind her, “Stop being so scared, Dandy,” says the woman. Come out here and say hello to him, at least.

They have disappeared, into the apple trees. What would Alice say about yesterday, if she tells?

An hour later, I’m back in the barn and he’s out front, hiding to one side of the doors. He peeks his head out until I catch his eye, then gestures at me to come outside with him. Crooks a finger, and from the register, I follow, entranced.

There are two people in the barn, looking at fruit, eyeing pies. I run over the gravel, the sound of it underneath my feet. Trespass. Here I am.

“Let’s go to the beach,” he says.

He pulls me to the side of the building so that no one can see us from inside.

“I’m dying for a beach day.” He glances down at me, his hands on my forearms. “God, that apron looks good on you,” he says.

I laugh.

“I can’t leave,” I say. “Did Alice say anything to Terence?”

“About what? It’s so hot. We can’t endure the heat here. Come on. Run away with me.”

He raises his eyebrows and gives me a dramatic look—*let’s go*. I glance back into the barn. Both corgis are by the register, stretched on the floor with their back legs kicked out behind them, getting their whole bellies to the cool concrete.

“Who will run the register?”

“There are a ton of people around. Someone will come in any second and take over. Come on, Junie. Live on the edge.”

“Did Alice tell Terence? Did she say anything?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. Maybe? I think she said, yeah, she did, that we went to your mom’s yesterday. We had three chaperons, come on. No big deal. Come with me today.”

“Terence didn’t say anything?”

Tony shakes his head. “Our secret is safe!” He opens his eyes wide. “What’s the big deal? Two old friends, reuniting.”

To leave this place for the day, to slip away, out from under all the tension. I want to believe him. No big deal. Who cares. Fancy-free. For one day. Don’t I deserve that much?

“Let me just tell them I’m leaving,” I say, and I run to the back of the barn, and look across the road, and there’s Carla, carrying a box of tomatoes to the barn.

“Carla!” I run into the dirt road. “I have to run off for an emergency. Can you take over the register for me? There are two women in there.”

“Is Amanda okay?”

She looks concerned. She leans forward, towards me.

“Yes, yes, fine. I just need to go. Let Danielle know? Go inside, okay? There are customers in there.”

“Sure, June,” she says.

When did she stop calling me Mrs. Roe? Who cares. I turn and run back to Tony, and he laughs and claps once when he sees me, does a funny leap, and we run

across the gravel and jump into his green Saab. The sunroof is open. The air blows in as he backs up, then pulls onto one-seventeen, away away away, oh, he's taking me away!

We take a drive to the shore—all the way to the shore! Almost two hours away, north on ninety-five and then one twenty-eight to its end, in Rockport.

“What if something happens to Amanda?” I say. “What if someone needs me?”

“It'll be fine, but we can stay if you want. Do you want to stay? Should I turn back?”

“No,” I say. “No, please, let's go.”

We go to Rockport, eat ice cream from a shop on the pier, walk to a beach down the road. Barefoot on the sand. Big black rocks covered in barnacles up the shore, clustered in twos and threes and a big pile that stretches into the sea. Little boys walking the rocks, careful steps (the barnacles tear skin so easily), arms out to hold them steady. The salt smell swirling around us. Fifty strangers on the beach. No one would know who we were, holding hands, pinkies hooked together as if by accident. Just like teenagers. Like Carla and Bruce. Me and Tony.

We lie down on the hot sand, in the sun, for two hours.

“Terence told me about the workers,” he says, his hand grazing mine.

“It's a mess.” I keep my eyes closed, face in the sun. Sweat drips down my back.

“How are you doing with it all?”

The sun is hot on my body, and it's all I feel now. The pressure of the heat on my body.

"I feel apart from it. Distracted."

"Mm-hm," he chuckles.

"I've been translating again," I say. I run my hands over the sand. I make letters. *LPJT*. Idle. "I haven't done it for years, and now it's coming back to me, all the words in French just pop into my mind."

"I must be your muse."

I look over at him and he grins, his confident, women-wooing grin. I laugh. My laugh sounds strange. I haven't heard myself laugh like this in so long—spontaneous and loud. I feel it in my gut, and it's strange. But after a moment, I recognize it: joy. The early days with Gerald, and when Amanda was born.

"Have you seen Alan Ball again yet? Want me to go with you?"

"No. I haven't called. I don't want to think about it today. I don't want to think about any of that. How's your mother? How's the move going?"

"It might bring closure. You're not avoiding it, are you?"

I see splotches with my eyes closed, in the sunlight—patches of color that appear and disappear against the darkness. It's too hot. I roll over, onto my stomach, and hide my head underneath my arm.

"I don't believe in closure," I say.

He rolls onto his side and leans into me. "The move's almost done," he says, and then he kisses my cheek, just in front of my ear. As he pulls back, it's as if his lips have stayed on me, and my whole body is electrified. There comes a breeze, and I'm

content—for the first time in a long time, content—and I reach for his hand, and hold it with my head still tucked underneath my arm.

“Say you’ll call him before I go,” he says.

“I’ll call him before you go,” I whisper. Beyond us, people laugh, someone hollers, “Come in! Come in! It’s not bad!” and someone shrieks with delight.

When I get back to the orchard at seven pm, the barn is closed, and everyone’s gone home. I wave goodbye to Tony, and he pulls back onto one-seventeen, off around the bend, his arm out the window. I watch him go, and turn, finally, to go home, too.

There’s a note under my windshield wiper, a piece of printer paper folded in half, and in Danielle’s big loopy handwriting: *Nice, June. Take a day off mid-season, please. Be my guest. Today of all days! And by the way, I know what you’re doing.*

Super, I think. Wonderful. Two lovely notes in one day.

I crumple the note and throw it into the car, and speed the whole way home. I don’t *care* if she knows. I’m tired of caring. I’m done.

I pick up Amanda, and apologize again to Mrs. McCrae. How sorry I am, working too late at the orchard. So sorry, so sorry, and thank you so much.

Amanda is cranky, whines about going home. She wants to sleep at Mrs. McCrae’s. When I take her hand, she wails. “No, Momma! Stay here. I sleep here.”

“We have to go, Panda. We have to go.”

I pull her toward the car, then give up and pick her up. She screams, crying. My shoulders fall. Why can’t I make this easier for her? And I feel the guilt, the deep

untenable guilt, because I've left her all day. For three days running. Many times this summer.

"You know, dear," says Mrs. McCrae from the doorway, "I think she just misses you. She talks about where you are all day long, when she's here. She needs her mother. That's all."

I lean my head into Amanda, and rub her back and sigh. I want to rebel against Mrs. McCrae, too, and tell her, *What do you know?* But she's a gentle old woman. And she's right.

"You're right," I say.

I hate the realization—that I am *not* footloose and fancy-free, no matter how Tony and I pretend. I have a daughter. I have a husband. And too many bills to pay. And a job. Two jobs. And a dog who needs his shots. And a sister in a hospital, and a widowed mother down the road. That's the truth I can't escape.

"We'll go home now, baby, and I'll read you a story, okay?"

She whimpers. "Okay," she says.

I turn back to Mrs. McCrae. "I'll bring her to the orchard tomorrow. I'm so sorry."

She shakes her head. "People do strange things during hard times," she says.

"You're in a hard time."

She holds up one hand and closes the door. I swing side to side with Amanda until she quiets, and then set her gently into her carseat, kiss her on the forehead, buckle her in, and drive us both home in the dusk.

Back home, nothing in the house has changed. Nothing in the yard. Simon groans and stretches, leaps down from the couch. The flowers I cut from the backyard this morning—blue hydrangeas—are still in the vase on the table. Round blooms so big only three fit in the red ceramic vase. We’ve had dinner, and now Gerald and Amanda are playing in her room. She’s just become interested in the dollhouse that my father made for her in his shed workshop. He bought the lumber and sawed it down, and even made miniature furniture sets for the dining room and bedrooms, and my mother made tiny quilts for the beds, and they painted the outside yellow. When we were little, he made us each a dollhouse, a swingset, and an ice rink, filled it with water in the wintertime. We skated on it every day. Stella got hockey skates because she wanted to play with the boys.

I hear Amanda talking, and Gerald saying, Ooooooh!, in a strange voice he uses just with her. He’s making the dolls talk, I can tell. Amanda laughs. Maybe she’s cured from this bad day, from my abandonment of her.

Stella will be here in three days.

I sit down on the couch, alone. The house is quiet and dim, no lamps on. The breeze furls through the house, screen doors and windows open to let the heat out at night. During the day, it’s all curtains and fans.

I hear Amanda: “Daddy, I tuck you in bed.”

“Okay,” he says. “Night night.”

“No,” says Amanda. “*This.*”

Amanda is getting opinionated.

I lie back against the couch, and close my eyes. Then, she's beside me on the couch, palms scratchy against my face. I open my eyes. The windows are dark. She leans down and kisses me, and Gerald calls, "Hey June," from the kitchen, and the refrigerator opens, the bottles clank in the door, and he pops open a beer.

"Can I have one?"

He doesn't say anything.

"Momma!" She drapes her body over me and hugs my knees. I pick her up, hold her against me, kiss her cheeks.

"Hi, baby. Ger, did Danielle call?"

"No," he says. "She and I met this afternoon to talk about the workers."

My heart stops. They met? Today?

"Oh? Where'd you meet?"

He doesn't answer me. Says, "She wants Nadine's help. Nadine knows a lawyer who'll do it pro bono."

The refrigerator opens again, and the bottles clank, and he pops another top, then walks across the living room. I want to scream, *Nadine, Nadine, Nadine! Just go to her, already!* But I have Tony, now, it would seem. Not in any real way, but as a friend. As more than a friend, if I am the most honest with myself. Yes, he's become more than a friend. But it isn't physical. Not like he and Nadine with their late nights and his night away from home, at the office, likely with her. He never explained it, did he? What am I to think.

"Momma," she says.

"What, honey?"

She sits up on my stomach and zips up my sweatshirt, then pulls it back down again.

Gerald comes up behind me and hands me the open beer. When I take the bottle, it's already sweating in my hands, wet and cool. I look up. His face upside down. No smile. No happiness in his eyes. Does he know I wasn't there? That I ran off today? Will Terence tell him that Tony and Amanda and Alice visited my mother? Will my mother say anything? No. She won't. That, I know. There were her folk days, singing in that other church, her friend who played the guitar while she sang.

But last night, trying to make love for the first time in weeks, I pulled away from Gerald.

He said, 'You never let me *touch* you.'

"How about we go to the beach tomorrow?" he says.

He knows. He must know. Amanda presses her hands against my breasts.

"The beach?"

He nods and takes a sip of beer. Looks at us on the couch. Is he trying to read me to see

the lie?

"How'd you get so sunburned?"

My heart pounds. Amanda takes her hands from my chest and pulls at my earrings, trying

to take them off.

"No, sweetie, you can't play with those."

"You haven't worn those in awhile," says Gerald.

“Can you get the day off?” I say. I don’t look at him. I focus on Amanda.

“No,” I say,

and pull her hands down.

“Yeah. Of course I have the day off if I want it.”

“Well, you’ve been going in every day.”

“I try them on,” says Amanda.

“I’m in charge of the summer school,” says Gerald. “I have no choice.”

“But tomorrow you can take off.”

“I’ll go in for a couple of hours. Nadine will cover the meetings for me.”

“Ow! Amanda, *no*.” She’s yanked at my earring too hard. She gives me a downtrodden look.

“Sorry, Momma.”

“It’s fine, Panda.”

“Please,” he says.” His voice softens. “I want us to have a day together. I’m trying to be nice. We’re not really, I don’t know, communicating, so maybe we need to spend some time together.”

The car. I need to tell him about the car. And the mortgage. If I don’t tell him now—

“Do you think she can help?” I say.

“Rarh!” Amanda roars in my face. She’s doing the lion roar that we always do when we do the zoo puzzle.

“Are you a lion?”

She nods.

“With the case?” he says. “She thinks so. She doesn’t think this will come to anything.”

“Danielle’s a wreck.” And I should be there for her, I think. But I’m running instead. Aren’t they always telling me to do something for myself? Well, here it is.

“I’m surprised you’re not more upset, frankly,” he says. “They’re your friends, too.”

I take a swig of the beer. Tilt my head forward and stare at the mantel. Amanda slides against me and puts her head on my chest. It hurts against my skin, which is pulsing and hot from the sunburn. So stupid, falling asleep in the sun like that. I take a sip. Stroke her hair. Look down at her. Little baby face, baby-fat cheeks. In another year, she’ll lose that. She’ll be an all-grown-up almost-four year old. I should care more about what’s happening to Omar and Romero—I *do* care, and I’ve been angry about it. But now there’s Tony and the chance for escape, and I feel selfish, dwelling in the delight of being with Tony, who doesn’t carry any of the last three years—Mary’s accident, my father’s death, Stella’s running—who is just an old friend back in town, who hears me when I speak.

“Momma.”

I push her hair back from her face and tuck it behind her ears. Her big blue eyes. She’s only being two and half, I tell myself. This is what it is—nuisance and love.

“I just thought,” says Gerald, “with Stella coming soon, we should have a day together. Maybe it would help. You know?”

“Aunt Stell, Aunt Stell,” says Amanda, and she sits up, slides off me, and runs upstairs. Amanda will bring down the bear that Stella gave her when she was born; it’s her favorite. She sleeps with him every night, and sings to him before she falls asleep, after we’ve closed the door and said goodnight.

“Crane?” he says.

He’s trying so hard now. Why now? Why, finally, now, when I’m fed up with his silence and his distance, and Tony’s offering a respite. Why now, Gerald?

We used to go to Crane Beach in Essex. It’s a long drive, but worth it for the wide beach and long dunes. You can walk the beach for miles. Boardwalks rise over the dunes between the parking lot and the beach, and there’s that summer sound of footsteps over the wood.

“I want to, but I don’t know if I can take a day from the orchard. There are events every day, practically.”

The sink of guilt, lying to him. I can’t take a day because I just took a day.

He goes back to the kitchen and sets down his beer. Starts chopping vegetables.

“How’d you get so sunburned?” he says, still chopping.

“The orchard. I helped Manuel all day.” That sounds too obvious. Not specific enough. God, I’m not a liar. I hate myself for doing this. “We were in the raspberry patch getting the last of them. Looks like we’re into blueberry season now.”

I hide my face with my free hand, pinching my nose, my eyes squinched tight.

“Amanda was with you?”

“No, she was at Mrs. McCrae’s again.”

He doesn't say anything. Does he know that I left work? Did Danielle call him? Did he call the orchard looking for me? No, he'd have called my cell. And Danielle wouldn't call him. Would she? Does he believe my lies?

"Want a hand?" I say, my eyes still covered.

"I'm fine," he says.

He keeps chopping. I'm tired. I'm too tired to fight.

"I'm going to take a bath." I say it softly, almost a murmur, so it sounds like acquiescence. "You stay here with Daddy, okay, Panda?" I say, and lift her off of me, onto the couch.

She nods, sleepy now, one finger in her mouth. I get up and bring my beer with me. As I go upstairs, Gerald keeps on chopping. Louder, and louder, and louder—the knife coming down, and down, and down.

*

ADDICTS USE THEIR PETS TO GET DRUGS: Burglaries in the last few weeks have been particularly disturbing and dangerous. Thieves in Stow last week stole, among other controlled substances, some vials of Euthasol, the drug used to euthanize animals. If someone mistakenly got a hold of it and decided to inject it, it would be immediately fatal. Other medications designed specifically for animals can be just as harmful. More and more animals are being maintained on things like Valium and Phenobarbital pills to manage pain or seizures, or as a sedative.

*

THRUSH. FOUNDER.

Is that the source of the lameness? Where does it begin, how will we trace its history in the body, threads of pain and cause and effect. How will we know?

I went to see her there, in her second year. I was in the first year of the Master's program in Michigan, home for fall break. She was always studying, no time for anything but studying. Danielle had just gotten married to Terence and was pregnant with Nan, right out of college. Old-fashioned, said my father at their wedding, like us. Yeah but you did it because you were *virgins*, said Stella. She was about to be a junior in college. She loved to shock. She threw back her curled head and laughed.

I met Mary at the large animal clinic in Grafton because she had half an hour between a class there and the start of her internship with Dr. Krauss. We'd have lunch at the dining hall.

She was talking about the horses she saw that morning.

"This beautiful Thoroughbred," she said, "worth at least twenty thousand—"

"Dollars?"

"Yeah," she said, and laughed. "And some little girl's pony with a broken leg, the mother

must have plenty of resources to bring that animal here, said her husband died this spring and the girl could not lose that horse, and there was a cow with an intestine that needs another surgery."

"A cow? You work on cows here, too?"

"Oh, yeah," she says, "Yup." She laughed again. "A llama, too."

She pulled open the door of the dining hall for me, and we walked in. Got our trays. Sat down. The tabletops were yellow, the chairs blue.

“Weird color scheme.”

“Oh, it’s the ugliest dining hall. They haven’t redone it since the eighties. There’s a nicer one but it’s further away.”

She was talking quickly. I thought it was to get in everything she could in these thirty minutes. She ate a turkey sandwich, just half of it, five quick bites and she was done.

“So you like it?” I said. “The work?”

“I love it. Mm-hm. I love it more than anything.”

“Better than being a lawyer?”

“Of course. Yeah. I mean, I liked that alright, but—I love being around all these animals, and trying to figure out what’s wrong. Like a big puzzle. Kind of like solving a case, but better. I love to help them.”

Last Spring, I’d watched her run her hand down the back of a white horse’s leg, at the clinic, a day I watched. She was so steady and calm and sure, and picked up the horse’s hoof and held it against her knee. Touched the hoof with something small and metal and hooklike, pressing. Put the hoof down and came up. She said one word: “*Thrush.*” The doctor said, “Yes,” and talked about foundering. What is the difference? How can we tell? There was a group of five students, second years, said Mary later, rolling her eyes; they were all clustered around the doctor, listening with their notepads.

I ate my pasta salad in the cafeteria, poking at the pasta with my plastic fork.

“So,” she said, “how is it being in the PhD program?”

“It’s good. Pretty good so far.”

“Who are you translating again?”

“Magdalene Tetrault.”

“Right, right. The Canuck.”

She took a sip of chocolate milk, from a little carton like we had when we were small. There must only be three or four sips in there. It looks so small now.

“How many more hours do you have?”

“Uh, I don’t know, I lost track.” I waved my fork in the air. Looked at the window at the other end of the room, sunlight falling onto the orange tabletop.

“But you’re doing it, right? You’re going to get the PhD?”

“Yeah. Of course I am.”

“Do you like it? You don’t sound like you like it.”

“I do. But the people, sometimes, I don’t know.”

“You never liked that competition,” she said. “Remember in middle school? You lost it over Nina and Danielle?”

“I did not.” I jabbed at my pasta.

“Yeah,” she said. “Yeah you did.”

“Well, it was *middle school*. Not really anyone’s shining moment, is it?”

“Does Gerald want you to get the PhD? Does he tell you not to do it?”

“He tells me to do whatever I want to do.”

“Really?”

“Uh, yes, Mary. Where is all this coming from?”

“Nothing,” she said. “Nothing.”

She looked away. Waved to someone across the dining hall. Looked at her watch. “God,” she said, “it’s almost time for me to run.”

“No,” I said, “Tell me what this is about.”

“It’s nothing, Junie,” she said. “It’s just that I worry you’ll give this up. That Gerald will become the academic and you’ll be the wife. That’s what happens sometimes, I’ve seen it happen. In law school. In vet school. Someone has to pick up the slack at home, and it’s usually not the man.”

“Is that what you’re afraid of?”

“Well, yeah.”

“I mean for you.”

She stared at me. Half-grinned. “No,” she said, “Not for me. I’m happy not being settled down. That’s why I choose it. Not because I’m afraid of relationships.”

I looked away and took another bite.

She was afraid for me, for my future. Is it me who needs solving, me who needs a cure?

“Well,” I said. “That’s not happening to us. Just because we’ve been together forever, it doesn’t mean that we’re falling into some fifties lifestyle. He’s not as traditional as you think, trust me.”

She nodded. “Good,” she said. “I’m glad to hear it. Listen, you just give it right back to those academics. That’s what you have to do. You have to fight.”

“Thanks for the wisdom.”

She laughed. "I've just had too much school."

Before vet school, she got a JD. At Harvard. She went straight from undergrad. She had fellowships, no student loans. She worked for a year for a big firm in Boston and made too much money (her words). And then, she decided to *follow her true passion* and applied to vet school. She always loved animals, rescued the baby bunnies we found once motherless in the yard, trained our childhood dogs, ran over to pat every dog or cat or horse she saw. Raised a pig and a goat for 4H when she was ten, and took care of the neighbors' sheep down the street. She learned to shear them, and how much feed they got, and was there when they gave birth come spring. She even loved mucking their pens. For vet school, she used her law money, and took out loans for the rest.

"Yeah, yeah, sucks to be brilliant." I ate another bite of pasta salad, then opened my mouth and stuck out my tongue, the pasta half-chewed.

"You're foul," she said, and laughed harder.

"Okay," she said. "I gotta run. I'm really sorry."

"I'll walk you back."

"No, no. Stay and finish your lunch. So, I'll see you in a few weeks? At the reunion?"

"Yes. Let me walk you. I'm all done."

"No, it's fine, really. I have to run, anyway. I don't really have time to chat. I'm in such a rush."

I stood up and hugged her goodbye.

I'd fly back in December with Gerald, for the reunion, for Christmas. He'd stayed in Michigan this time to study, to write papers. He always saw himself as The Professor, and I did not know how to see myself. I wanted mostly to translate. I cared less about the awards, the hierarchy, than he did. He could play the game better than I could; he could hide his emotions, smile when he had to, butter up whichever dean needs buttering. But I did not think I would drop out. I did not think I'd stop at the Master's. Did not ever think that she would be right—that I'd become *that wife*. The woman who accompanied The Professor to the meetings, whom people saw as *not quite as smart*. The one without the degree, they thought, the one who took care of things *at home*. The mother. The keeper of the house. I did not think this would be me. Just one of a list things I did not see coming.

“Well, this is how it is,” Stella would say. “Let them think what they want. Move on. You could still do it in your free time. It's not like you can only translate if you're in school.”

“I know. But there's never any time.”

“You have to *make* time,” she says. “It's what you love. That's what artists *do*.”

“I have a daughter. I have Mary, and Mom.”

“Here we go,” she says.

That day, Mary rushed off, to her next meeting with the vet, to follow her on rounds out in Concord. Driving through those rolling hills in the woods with the big white barns and the old colonial houses all preserved. *Where the rich people are*, Mary said.

Why didn't she let me walk her there? What else was she hiding? Tony's right—that I should find out, at last, what else she was hiding. Alan Ball knows.

ALAN BALL

The next morning, my sunburn has dulled to a hot tan, and I feel my body warm against the sheets—not the sharp prickle and itch of the night before but just the reminder that my body is alive, and tender. Gerald's off at work, and Amanda is curled up next to me in bed. She must have come in when Gerald got up. She's curled up on her side, her back arched to me, and I when I lean over her, I see her hands clasped in front of her chest on the bed. Little bird.

I force myself to do it, even before I get coffee. I'll catch him before he goes to work. I call Alan Ball.

When he picks up, there's the sound of an infant crying in the background. His wife had her baby. We meet—finally, we meet again, this time in Hudson, away from Grafton, away from the hospital, on neutral ground.

When we sit down, the metal chairs squeak on the tile floor, and the sound makes me cringe. Here we go again. It's a small café, with a blackboard of choices above the counter. We both have tea. It steams in my hands, the smell of chamomile, a good distraction.

"I talked to Perry and Sue since we met last time," he says.

His leg shakes against the table. He's wearing hiking shorts and shoes, a blue t-shirt with the faded Boston Red Sox slogan across the front.

"I don't remember them," I say. "From the program?"

"Yeah, part of that circle we had back then, the crew of friends."

I nod. I want to ask, *The ones who were all doing animal drugs?* But it's too callous. Alan is here as a favor. He doesn't want to do this, but he's doing it for me, for the family, probably for Mary.

"They never thought she did it on purpose, you know."

My heart catches. This is what I wanted to know. This is what, I realize, I've been waiting for him to say. I don't speak. I let him talk.

"They thought it was an accident. She was too ambitious to—" he looks down, then glances up at me, "to kill herself. I don't think she would have, not ever."

A couple walks into the café and chats with the person behind the counter. They seem to know each other; their chatter is familiar, laughing. They order sandwiches, and the register makes a "ding!" I want to tell them to go away, to let Alan keep talking. I don't want anyone to delay the knowing.

"Anyway, we were talking about that, me and Perry and Sue, and they said I should tell you what we thought."

He stops. His leg is still shaking. It makes the surface of the tea ripple.

"Thank you," I say. "Thank you. I don't know—I didn't think she did it on purpose, either. Until we talked last time, and then I realized she was in much worse shape than I thought."

He starts talking again, as if he has a list memorized, and he needs to get it all out.

“There’s something that happened two years before the accident, though, and it’s part of why she was using more, I think. I mean, I know it was. It’s, uh, it’s a little hard to explain.”

His voice breaks.

“Are you—”

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” He holds up a hand. “I’ll just say it: So, the thing about being a vet, we learned, is that you have access to all these drugs, right? And you’re there, in the hospital with all these drugs all the time, and there aren’t the same rules as for doctors. You can, like I said before, make up animals to prescribe things to, and just take a bottle here or there, and fudge it in the records, so no one notices. You can be there after hours to help an animal who’s staying over, and no one else is around, and everything’s lined up there, waiting for you.”

I try not to say anything. I don’t sip my tea. I don’t move. The couple in the corner laughs and talks, about their landscaping, whether they should spend some amount of money on a dogwood—and then they blur out, their voices a fog behind me.

“His name was Rudie.”

“Who?” I ask. “Whose name was Rudie?”

“He was two years ahead of us, a fourth year. We got to be friends with him our first year, and he sort of showed us the ropes, gave us studying tips, told us how to get through the second year of exams—he was kind of a mentor, I guess. He was the

child of immigrants who had worked manual labor all their lives so he could do this—college, and then become a doctor. They were so proud of him. But in his fourth year, he was depressed and he wouldn't do anything about it—talk to someone, I mean. He wasn't doing as well as he hoped he would. He wanted to be a large animal surgeon, upper respiratory disease was his focus, but he wasn't cut out for it. His hands weren't steady enough. So, he shifted to sports medicine diagnostics. He'd asses these great athletic horses that people brought in from the show circuit or the racetrack. He was doing well, by anyone's standards, but he felt like he'd failed. And, uh—”

Now, he cries, tears coming down his cheeks, sliding onto his chin and neck. The couple behind us lowers their voices. Alan wipes his face with one hand, but he keeps talking. I touch his hand, which rests on the mug.

“I just have to get this out,” he says.

“Okay,” I say. I pull my hand back.

“He was bored, without surgery, and he felt like a failure. My wife says we're all Type A's, and we don't know when to back off. She tells me all the time to just take a vacation, stop working so hard.”

“That was Mary all right,” I say.

He laughs a little, and wipes his face again.

“So, we watched him get worse, but he wouldn't listen to us about going to the clinic to talk to someone. And one day, he made a big mistake with one of the horses that had broken wind, RAO—it's, basically—it's like human asthma. And he pushed her too hard when he was lunging her, and she couldn't breathe and stumbled, then collapsed and broke a leg. It was a multiple fracture, and it would take months to heal,

and on top of her RAO, it didn't seem fair to her. So, the owners decided to put her down.

“He felt like shit about that, and wouldn't listen when we said it could have happened to anyone. But he had to meet with his supervisors the next day, the vets who oversee his work—they were upset, of course, and told him he'd made a rookie mistake, pushing her too hard. They thought he should know better by his fourth year. They take the fall for his mistakes, of course, so they were getting hell from the owners.

He pauses, and the tears start again. The couple behind us pick up their sandwiches, say goodbye to the person at the counter, and walk out. The door jingles.

“They found him the next day in the small animal clinic. He was sprawled out on the floor, and the IV was still in his arm.”

I shake my head. “The IV?”

“You know, when they put an animal down, they use an IV.”

The horror of what he's saying sinks into me. He killed himself? With the animal IV?

He nods, seeing that I understand, and sighs. Slows down finally.

“Sodium thiopental. He hooked himself up. When they found him, there he was, on the floor, a peaceful, dreadful death. Mary had gone in to meet Dr. Ames that day, to get—you know, to get some medications.”

He rubs his forehead, slides his palm over his bald spot.

“The supply,” I say. All of this is a shock, a dark life she had that we never knew, and my voice sounds wry and tired.

“And she found him there. They were walking back to the supply room, and the light in the examination room where he was lying was still on, and she glanced through the window—and there he was.”

“Oh, god,” I say.

“That was two years before she died.”

“Why didn’t she tell us?”

He shrugs. “She never talked about it after it happened. She didn’t even go to the funeral. She just worked harder, pushed herself harder.”

I think of the hollows under her eyes when she sat with me at the Colonial Store, and her complaints about a headache. Of the bottles of pills in her purse, and in her apartment. How could she have lived this life that we knew nothing about? How could we have kept on under the delusion she was doing fine—maybe drinking too much, but still our perfect Mary, the smartest, the most beautiful?

“I wish I’d known,” I say. It’s insufficient.

“After it happened, the only time she talked about it, she said something about those boys when she was younger. Those boys who sailed off a cliff.”

“The Solomon twins?”

“She never said. She just said, ‘those boys who sailed off a cliff,’ and then when I tried to get her to tell me the whole story, she went silent again.”

I rub one temple. Why would she be talking about them? “They were driving around the quarry in high school and they skidded and went over the edge.”

He nods. “Well. For what it’s worth, I don’t think she did it on purpose,” he says. “She was just working so hard, and taking more and more to stay awake. She

was hardly eating that last month, and drinking so much coffee, on top of the pills—I think she was exhausted, but she didn't kill herself. She was furious with Rudie. She didn't do the same thing.”

I look into my tea, and think of that scene that Mary saw, and I put my hands over my eyes, and try to shut it out. I want to darken that world. I want to un-know the truth of her life, because I wasn't there to help. While she was dealing with finding Rudie like that, I was insisting she come to try on her bridesmaid's dress, consumed—entirely consumed—by the wedding, and my pregnancy, and my own life. I couldn't see out of my own world into hers, because I wouldn't try. I didn't want to. I was so self-absorbed. And she kept all these secrets. *Why?* Why didn't she try, either, to tell me?

“Why didn't she tell any of us? Didn't she trust the family? Maybe, if we'd known, maybe we—I—would have helped. What would I have done? Listened to her? Sent her to rehab?” I try to imagine a solution. But that past is just a blank.

“June,” says Alan. “It wasn't your fault. It was addiction. She was hiding it well. That's how it works.”

I realize I was talking out loud.

“She never said anything that would explain why she was addicted?” I say. “Did something happen to her when she was a kid? Was she depressed?”

“It doesn't always work that way. Sometimes, people are addicts just because it's how they are. It's a disease, you know? I still go to meetings twice a week.”

I don't say anything.

“You could come sometime, and see. It’s just a lot of people like me and Mary, regular people who got addicted to one thing or another and fucked up their lives. We all just got lucky, that’s all, because we stopped in time.”

“Before it killed you.”

“Yeah,” he says. “That’s right. Before it killed us.” His voice is all apology, because it didn’t work that way for Mary. She didn’t escape alive. She was probably, for Alan and all the other addicted vet students, a wake-up call. Which makes me angry. That her death would serve to save someone else’s life, that *that* would be the meaning of her life. But it makes me grateful, too, that her death did any kind of good in the midst of all the pain it’s brought her, and our family.

*

A WORD ABOUT CAREGIVER BURNOUT

If you’re the primary caregiver for an individual with a brain injury, “caregiver burnout” is a very real—and very common—problem. Caregiver burnout is a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion that occurs when someone is responsible for the long-term care of another person 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Caregivers often experience symptoms of fatigue, anxiety, stress and depression. They feel guilty when they take time out for themselves—or neglect their own physical and emotional needs altogether.

*

GUILT

It wasn’t just that I insisted that Mary come that day three years ago. It was the guilt trip I gave her, how I accused her of things I know she didn’t really do – or she did, but there was no way of changing them.

“Not a good sister,” I said. “You’ve become so selfish. You’ll do anything for your friends these days but what about me and Stella? Have you forgotten about us?”

And Mom and Dad? How do you just drift away like that? Now that you're a vet, living in Grafton, you don't need us anymore. That's what's happened. You don't care.

"I'm asking for *one day*," I said. "Come *on*. I'm about to get married. Can't you come out here for just one day? You can't become so consumed by your work. You have to put it aside now and then, Mary.

"What about family? I haven't seen you in two months," I said, "and I'm in town just for a few days, for this. Then I fly back to Michigan. Please. Be a good sister."

Why did I give her that guilt trip when she was working too hard already? When she was taking those pills, and drinking too much coffee, and studying all night. Didn't I know about all that, too, just like my father? He'd come home from visiting her at Columbia, when I was still in high school, and he'd tell my mother that Mary was doing fine. Just fine. They'd had dinner, he said, and her grades are good. She looks good. My mother was worried, but she let my father soothe her. And I did, too. Even though, I must have known, at some level. I must have.

I missed her. I simply missed the way things were. I have this memory of us, coming home from college and piling together to tell stories, watch movies, tell our secrets, do nothing. It was the year Stella broke her jaw sledding down Mill's Hill with her boyfriend, the two of them rolled into a tarp. My mother called them fools when she met them at the Emergency Room. Mary and I made Stella smoothies and ground up pizza for her when she craved it too fiercely. She talked funny, lisping, and sang Christmas songs for us until our stomachs hurt with laughter. It was a span of a week.

Then we all went back to school. Stella's jaw healed and she could speak normally again.

But, then, it wasn't always like that. There were gaps and distances and darkneses that bound us all apart from one another. There was never this simple time I remember. Maybe in glimpses, in moments, in quick darting seconds that passed by so quickly we did not notice them then. If I force myself to know: it was not a long and lasting thing, that closeness. It was not.

PIE.

When I get home, the phone rings. It's Danielle. I want to weep to her, to tell her what I've learned, but she says, without a hello or how are you: "Did you bake those pies?"

She's angry. She disapproves. But this is *my* life I want to say! And what have I ever done, stuck here, in Bolton, what have I *ever* done wrong? So I made a friend. It's not what you think.

"Almost done," I lie. "I made four."

"I need *six*," she says, "by tomorrow. I said six, June."

"*Okay*, Danielle, I know. They'll be done by tomorrow."

"Well don't forget. I'm meeting with Nadine and the Union rep again tomorrow, so I don't have time to make any pies. I need them by Wednesday. You'll get them done by then?"

"Of course. I said I would."

"Well," she says.

If I could tell her, would she sympathize? Or would she just be tired of hearing about this story, Mary's troubles? I'm so tired, thinking about what happened to my sister, and I just want to rest.

"Please," I say, "today, give me a break."

She acts like she doesn't hear me.

"Gerald called yesterday, wondering where you were."

"He—" I put my hand to my forehead. "He did?" I can't breathe. So when he was chopping the vegetables, when he asked—?

"I told him you were here. I *lied* for you."

I put my head against the wall, eyes closed. If I just don't look up, if I just keep my eyes closed, no one will know. I won't have to admit to this.

"Danielle, I'm—"

"Get it together, June, and stop this. *Stop* it."

"I—we're not doing anything—"

"I have to run," she says.

She hangs up.

APRIL

We went to the hospital one day, in the months after the accident, and they said there'd been a change. That she'd spent three hours conscious. She'd slept and then woken, like any other person. She did not just open her eyes now and then. And when

her eyes were open, she was tracking, watching everything the people in her room were doing. She'd said a word, or something—a sound.

“She’s coming back!” I said when I heard. I leaned forward and hugged him, an awkward hug because of my big stomach.

Dr. Smalls said, “It’s possible.” He held one hand out flat, palm down, as if to calm me. “This is a good step, but it is nothing we can count on. Simply because she is tracking does not mean she is processing, or understands, or can communicate.”

“But,” said my mother, “it’s progress.” She pulled her big wool sweater tighter around her body and crossed her arms. She looked up at Dr. Smalls, eyes narrowed.

He smiled a little. “Yes,” he said. “It is progress.”

My father came upstairs then and found us at the nurse’s station. Esther and Adam were behind the counter, sorting files, making notes, answering the phone. People walked behind us, Louise’s family, Louise who fell off a bike as she rode downhill and hit her head against the pavement. I heard her brother say, *This pudding isn’t worth shit.*

My mother shook her head. A tear slipped out of her eye, down her cheek. Her skin, I’d noticed, was thinner. Was sagging more at her neck. She was beginning to look old. I hadn’t seen her that way before, but now, there it was: my mother was aging quickly.

She said,. “This process is too slow. How long until we *know*?”

“It takes a long time,” said Dr. Smalls. “Years sometimes. It’s best not to get your hopes up, or you’ll always be on this roller-coaster.”

“I thought the most change came in the first year and a half,” I said. “Shouldn’t more be happening now?”

“For some people, yes, for others, no. It’s different for everyone. We may not see a great deal of change. You need to be ready for that. And, in some rare cases, people improve a great deal years later. But you’re here. You’re all involved, and she knows that, and that will make a difference.”

My mother and I nodded. I put my arm around her. I needed to pee, and my back was always sore. I was seven months pregnant by then.

My father shook his head and put his hands into his pockets.

“Can she hear us?” he said.

“Yes,” said Dr. Smalls. “I believe so.”

“Then let’s bring her books,” said my father. “We’ll read to her. We’ll make her remember everything she knows.”

Dr. Smalls shrugged. “It can’t hurt,” he said. “But remember, this could take a very long time.”

“We know,” said my mother. “Years.”

But none of us believed it. We said goodbye to Dr. Smalls and walked down the hall, talking about the boxes of books Danielle and I had stashed in the basement.

“All her medical books, you have those?” said my father. “You didn’t throw anything away, right? We agreed you’d keep everything.”

“I kept everything,” I said.

“We’ll sort through them tonight,” he said. “We’ll make a pile. We’ll reeducate her.”

“Okay,” I said.

Up until then, we’d been reading her novels, magazines, newspapers. Now, we would remember her life back to her, feed her veterinary medicine, feed her what she loved: animals she could touch back to health. This is what we’d do for her. We’d find the sore tendon. We’d coax in into life again. We’d soothe its swelling. And all would be well. We would help Mary find her way back.

*

RESEARCH

If veterinarians as a group truly are more prone to suicide, why would that be?

Bartram, the expert in Britain, could not be reached for comment. But in a March 2010 article in Risk Management Monitor, Bartram offered these possible explanations:

- *Those admitted to veterinary school have high-achieving personality types, traits of which may include neurosis, conscientiousness and perfectionism.*

*

MORTGAGE

When Gerald comes home at eleven, I’m not ready for the beach. I’m sitting in the living room, my hands beneath my legs. I got Amanda from Mrs. McCrae’s, and brought her home. I should be at the orchard. Danielle is probably furious with me.

But all that I can think of is Mary finding him, that other student, hooked up to the IV. Dead.

Gerald slings his briefcase onto the couch and sighs. Amanda screams, “DADA!” and runs to him from the coffee table, where she’s been drawing and playing with play-dough. I’ve been sitting behind her, watching. Trying not to sink into the memory that I imagine—Mary in that moment, Mary downing pills after that

moment, Mary choosing large animal medicine after that moment, to avoid that moment.

You can't undo the picture, she told me that in the bar a year before the accident. *You want to disprove the evidence that you'll end up like that, too*. And then she made out with one of those two men she knew from school or town or the bar scene, whom she'd called losers just moments before. She waved me off, sent me home, so I'd never know the truth until she was gone.

Gerald smiles, leans down and picks up Amanda, tossing her into the air. I'm always afraid he's going to throw her into the ceiling, but if I say anything, he'll just roll his eyes at me and do it again.

"How's my gremlin?" he says.

"Hey, Ger," I call from the kitchen. I lean my shoulder against the wall, one foot propped on the other.

"Hi."

He turns back to Amanda.

Then, he sets her down and walks into the kitchen, past me. Takes a beer from the refrigerator. I want to tell him about Alan Ball, but I don't want to tell him, either. It's too much to process. I've spent the afternoon playing with Amanda, and trying to block it all out, the whole conversation, the image of that poor man hooked up to the IV, the thought of Mary finding him.

"How was work?" I say.

He turns the cap on his beer and pops with the release of air.

He shrugs. "I got a call today, at the office."

"Oh?"

I turn and lean my back against the wall, so I'm not facing him but the wall behind the dining room table. There's the basement door. I could just slip downstairs, avoid all this, sit on the cool cement floor and listen to the washing machine whir. A call, a call—who would have called him at the office, and to say—? Would Danielle do that, was it about Tony, to warn him that she's suspicious, to keep an eye on me? The wall is cool against my warm back.

He nods.

"Our mortgage."

He raises his eyebrows at me.

I feel myself flush red, and something drops from my stomach to the floor, this fear of the truth—my secrets unfolding—of what he might have said. And this—which was supposed to be my responsibility. In that stack of bills. For me to pay and track and keep tallied in a book we keep in the desk. Our register. He would work the extra hours, for the book, for the Dean's position, and I would keep the bills. He would wash the dishes and take out the trash and fix the cars and renovate the living room (not even close to done, that task), and I would take care of the bills.

"Why'd you let that slip, Junie? First the gas and now the mortgage? What's going on? And *why* didn't you tell me they called? I had no idea this was happening. None."

He sets his beer down on the counter, too hard, and Amanda runs towards us whining, upset with the tone of his voice. She grabs at his legs.

The car. The car. Now is when I should tell him: ‘There’s one more thing, Ger, one more thing I’ve let slip. We can’t make the car payments. We haven’t paid for eighty days. They’re going to repossess it. What should we do?’ I should let it all spill out, now. But, Mary is speaking again. If I can get the speech therapist back in, a few days a week, there’s a chance that Mary will recover speech entirely. And maybe she can get into that study I read about, the brain implant—and she’ll talk again. If I tell him about the car, there’s no chance Mary will stay where she is. I know, I know, I know that we just can’t afford it.

“I just learned about it a few weeks ago—and I was going to tell you—“

“You’ve known for *weeks*? I thought you were keeping track of all the bills?”

I one hand over my face. Protect Mary. Protect Mary.

“I know. I don’t know how I lost track—”

He shakes his head, presses his fingers against one eye, sits down on the couch. His voice gets quiet.

“I should help you with the bills. I shouldn’t have left it all to you. It’s my fault.” He shakes his head.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

He leans back into the couch and looks up at the ceiling, his throat stretched long. “Well,” he says. “It gets worse.”

Amanda says, “Dada! Look, Dada!” holding up her play-doh ball. Pieces are dropping onto the floor, for me to clean later if they don’t get ground in. I turn to look at him.

“Worse, how?”

“The pay cuts are going to happen at Blanchard this year. For sure. And they’re going to be letting people go. Faculty.”

“I thought they could hold out a couple more years? What do you mean, this year?”

“Nadine came into my office today and told me. She talked to the dean yesterday. She had the courtesy to let me know right away.”

I walk into the living room.

“Nice, Ger. Nadine’s more courteous than me, that’s what you’re saying? She’s on top of things, unlike your wife?”

“No, no,” he says. He’s weary. He looks down at the coffee table, where his beer sweats into the wood.

“See, Dada?” says Amanda.

“It’s nice, Manda,” he says. “You did a good job. Can you go get a book upstairs for us to read? Will you go pick one out?”

She loves to read her books. She nods, and races up with the Play-doh in her hand. It’s going to get all over the carpet. Add it to the poop stains.

“When?” I say.

“Before school starts. They’re tanking, and enrollment’s down. All the kids are going to the community college. They’re taking ten faculty and twenty staff positions.”

I stare at the plastic draped between the living room and the family room, where I stand. I hear Gerald take another sip from his beer.

“So, basically,” he says, “yeah. We’re fucked.”

I put my hands on my hips. What would we do without Gerald's job?

"Daaaaada," Amanda calls from upstairs, and he says, "Coming, baby."

Before he goes, he turns to me and says quietly, "I don't know what's going on with you, but we need to figure this out. Now. Or we'll be homeless soon."

He grabs his beer and walks upstairs, to read with her before changing and going for a walk, an escape he'll take for hours.

The plastic shivers when he walks past; there's the softest sound of its crinkle in the air.

*

RESEARCH

• *Stress begins during training and continues in practice, with a work environment marked by long hours, high psychological demands, potentially low support from managers and high expectations by clients. Solo practitioners may be professionally and socially isolated.*

*

RABBIT CRY

I wake up to a baby crying, sit up automatically, thinking it is Amanda in need of another feeding.

But, no, no. I stand up and realize: Amanda is two, had dinner with us tonight.

It's so quiet. Where is Gerald? The bed is empty, red tulips crinkled one over the other.

There's the cry again, far off in the woods. An infant wailing, wailing, the worst sound that I know. I realize now that it's a rabbit dying. Their little wails of death like a newborn infant's cries.

Where is Gerald?

I walk to the hall, past Amanda's room, the house still full of the smell of cherry and blueberry pies, which I baked all afternoon, playing with Amanda while they were in the oven. I walk down the stairs—and there he is, sleeping on the couch, one side of his face pressed into the throw pillows, the other cheek squished up on the back of the couch. His neck is twisted; he'll wake up sore.

Outside, far off, I think I hear a gun shot. Could it be? Who would be shooting, here?

I turn and walk back upstairs, through the quiet house, to my bedroom and the open windows, swift little breeze coming in. The rabbit's gone silent.

BUNDLED

Amanda was eight months old. She'd grown what Gerald called her get-me-through-the-winter thighs. Fat rolls at the knees. I loved it. We both did. Loved to tickle the backs of her legs and watch her cheeks round up as she laughed. That gurgly chuckle she had then.

My father had just had his second heart attack, in October, and still, he wouldn't slow down. This was the second winter that Mary was in the hospital. He'd shoveled the first snow we got in early December. He drank his whiskey every night. He smoked his cigarettes on the sly—in the old shed, maybe dreaming of the days he

and Mr. Crennell built it, young and just out of the army, slipped from Vietnam into this marriage and this house in the woods. Probably surreal still, then, to have gone from that terror to this easiness. He used to look at us, when we were very small, before they started with the baby problems, and he was so happy. He was so proud of every small thing we did. Making houses out of legos or building forts outside or learning to swim. Anything would please him.

I don't know when it shifted. When he expected different things. When only Mary could please him, would live up to what he thought we could be.

He protected her. He'd always protected her the most. Maybe he saw, before all of us, how fragile she was. Maybe he was afraid this would happen. Maybe he knew more than the rest of us did. All those drives to New York when she was in college, to Boston when she was in law school. To Grafton when she was in vet school at Tufts. Every Ivy League. All those days he tried to prop her up. And when she got her law degree, when she got her diploma, when she passed all the tests with A's in vet school—the way his face lit up. Even Amanda's birth couldn't match it.

But in December, Mary had been gone for one year and three months. Had gone from the hospital to the rehab center in Worcester to the good rehab center in Bolton. Had regressed and then made tiny steps of progress again. Was on her way back again, we said. My father didn't say that anymore. My father just sat and talked to her. Hat in his hands. Old brown coat on the chair behind him. Sometimes, I'd hear him tell her stories about when we were little—the time he lost us at the fair and we were found by Mr. Grenton and fed pie until we were found again, the time we went sledding down Parker's Lane in the big snowstorm of '78. "You were five, and Junie

was two,” he’d say. “You girls were all bundled up and I kept pushing you down that hill. And you’d say, Again, again. You loved it, Mary.”

My mother stayed home those days. She couldn’t go back, not even when my father started going again. I knew how much guilt he carried, knew he thought that this was his fault—the accident. He’d spent Mary’s life protecting her, visiting her at Colombia and Harvard and Tufts, trying to protect her from herself, from the drinking and then, I learned after the accident, the pills. *I knew*, he said, *about all that*. How long could he carry that before it killed him? A year and a half, it turned out. So the accident took the both of them.

He told Mary stories about the war, too. Stories none of us had ever heard. I walked in on him once in the middle of a story. About him and Bennie Drob, his best war friend. Who died one year after he came home, of an aneurism. He’d go up and visit Bennie’s son and wife sometimes, drive up to New Hampshire by himself for the weekend and come back somber, like he knew more about life now that he’d seen them. But he and Bennie were smoking a joint, he said to Mary, “in that fucking jungle,” he said (my father, who never swore in front of us), “and keeping each other alive with stories about home. And laughing in the rain, even when they heard the bombs in the distance. The thick drip of the rain from the leaves,” he said, “It became this great sound in my ears.”

Amanda coughed in my arms, and my father turned. Saw me standing there in the doorway. I smiled.

“Sorry,” I said.

He looked back to Mary.

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. I was just waiting till you finished.”

“I’d better go.” He curled his hat into his hands and stood up.

“I never heard that one.”

He wouldn’t look at me. He put on his coat. The sound of the wool sliding across his shoulders, the rustle of cloth, the beeping of Mary’s heart monitor (that constant near-steady rhythm). He put his hand on my shoulder as he left, still not looking up, as if he bore a series of grievances so deep and so painful that none of us could ever know—not me, not Stella, not, least of all, my mother, who bore her own lifelong grief. Maybe Mary could understand, he must have thought. Did he tell her these things before she was gone, too? Or was it only now that she was this silenced person waiting for our talk to fill the space that would otherwise fill with despair, looking at her, or thinking too much about what had happened or the prospects of her recovery, all she would have to overcome, all that she had been once, how much time had passed, how this family has lost each other in the process—now, this room, Mary, was a confessional for each us. Waiting to bear out our secrets.

“Dad,” I said, “Come on.”

But he put his hand on my shoulder, and walked out, and that was it. He did not look at me. He did not look at Amanda. He kept his eyes on the floor.

In December, the little white colonial was still a mess. Everything we’d started in the summer was half-done. The kitchen cabinets were white, the walls that bright, bright yellow. The sink was still the old stainless steel version that came with the house, too shallow to fill a big pot. The rim around the drain would rust if I didn’t scrub it every

day. The living room walls had been knocked down but not built up again, so we'd kept the plastic up between the living room and the stairs, the entryway. The room was gutted to the frame, and we'd have to wait for Terence or Chris Thompson to come over and help hang the drywall. By winter, we said, it would be done. It was December, and it wasn't done, of course. There had been too much—with Amanda, with the orchard that summer and fall, my first year working full-time for pay. We'd done enough to insulate and cover the outer walls—a quick fix until the drywall came. Next weekend, Gerald said, We'll do it next weekend. One side of the house was covered in Tyvek, house wrap, which would get us by until they could replace the slats.

My mother would come to the house and sit with Amanda in the living room, the quilt she'd made for her spread on the floor. Small squares of green and blue and red, flower prints and stripes. All her quilts were cheerful, no matter how sad she was when she made them, as if she was putting everything she wished for into the cloth. Amanda sat on the blanket, and then crawled to the kitchen. She wanted to touch all the shiny knobs and handles, new silver fixtures we'd put on this fall after we painted.

"Come back, Amanda," my mother would say, and she'd pick her up and walk back to the living room. My mother would laugh with her. I loved to hear her laugh with Amanda.

"Do you know," she said, "Don took me out yesterday, to the preservation?"

"Yeah?"

I walked through the living room, picking up toys, heading for the laundry basket. The old washer and dryer were in the basement, the door at the back of the

kitchen, behind the table. I always had to shove one of the chairs out of the way to get the door open. Trip after trip, up and down the stairs, each load taking two runs through the dryer because it would only half-dry things the first time through. Damp warm clothes settled in the metal basin.

“What did you see?”

I picked up the laundry basket, and Amanda squealed, reaching for a sock puppet my mother had been holding up for her. I’d made it for Amanda last week when I sat with Mary. Just like your mother, my father would say, when he saw me writing or making a collage. I’d think: No. Nothing like her. *Stella* is the one who knits. She’s the one who sews, who makes pots and mugs out of ceramic, who makes art. I’m not like my mother.

“Ovenbirds, grackles and towhees. Nothing spectacular.”

“But you went. That’s great.”

I put the laundry basket on my hip and pulled open the door. The crash against the chair. Shoved my way into the gap, flicked on the light, and took the stairs slowly. Old, steep crumbling stairs.

“Keep her from the door!” I called. “Be right back.”

“I’m right beside her. Of course I’ll keep her from the door.”

The basement was dark, even with the bulb lit. The washer and dryer were in the far corner, a piece of rock jutting up between here and there. I always had to walk crouched down there because the ceiling was so low.

Next year, we said, we’ll bump out the kitchen and make a nook for the washer and dryer up there.

Our sweet dream.

Back up the stairs, light off, back to the living room. I flopped down next to my mother on the couch. She took the puppet off her hand and leaned back. Amanda held a plastic apple in her hand, a present from Danielle this fall. We sell plastic sets of apples in baskets at the orchard. Plastic maple sugar candy. Plastic pears and peaches, and little McNally aprons, green, just like the real ones, made for three and four year olds.

Amanda banged the apple against the pail, up and down, loving the sound. She shouted, a baby squawk. Always so noisy now.

My mother smiled.

“Well,” she said, “When do you have to go back to the orchard?”

“Not till five.”

It was a Saturday, the last wedding of the year, in a tent filled with heat lamps up near the vineyard.

“Do you want to come? You could bring Amanda for a little bit?”

“No, no. I have to get home and make dinner for your father. We’ll take care of her for you. You come by when you’re done. Or,” she said, “you could pick her up in the morning. She could sleep over.”

Amanda kept banging the apple on the pail, then threw it a few feet away. Simon perked up behind the couch and came over to sniff the apple. Wagged his tail. Went over to Amanda and licked her face.

She screamed. She hated having her face licked.

“Oh, Simon.” I pushed him away. I picked up Amanda and held her. “You’re okay,” I said. I rubbed her back. “No, I’ll come back and pick her up.”

“Why don’t you let her stay over? She’ll be fine, Junie, for one night.”

“No, it’s okay. Thanks, though.”

My mother rolled her eyes and touched Amanda’s leg, pulled her pants down over her calves. My mother and I hadn’t spoken much that fall because she’d stopped visiting Mary, and I was angry. Gerald tried to make the peace between us, but nothing worked—not until my father’s second heart attack in late October. Then, finally, I gave in. Realized she could only give this much. She was heartbroken already, and tired, and just trying to find a way to protect herself from any more hurt. Maybe from further away, she could still believe that Mary was fine, was off at Tufts like usual.

“I’d better go,” she said.

I kept patting Amanda’s back. Her screams in my ear. That pierce.

“You’re going to have to leave her sometimes,” she said.

“Of course I’ll leave her,” I said. “But not yet. She’s still too young.”

“She’s eight months now. Plenty old enough. Let me take her for the night.”

“Mom.”

She pursed her lips. “Fine,” she said.

She pushed herself up off the couch and pulled down her dress at the hips, straightening the corduroy against her tights. She wore her old gray wool clogs.

“Thanks,” I said.

She waved and turned and closed the door behind her. I stood holding Amanda. She was quieting down. My hand still on her back. She rested on my shoulder, slumped and tired. Ready for her second nap. She was only supposed to have one by then, but she always slept through the night; I kept both naps.

The sun had come through the clouds, and it shone into that front window all white and warm, the snow outside aglare with it. I stood in the light and let it warm us, the feel of Amanda almost asleep against me, her breath slowing, her arm bent against my neck, her hand wet from her mouth, fingers curled in, us swaying back and forth. The quiet of it. Just then, and in all the other pauses I'd had with Amanda, little moments like this, when we were laughing or quiet, I loved being a mother. I put my face against her, and smelled her powdered skin, her little body curved and relaxed against me, leaning into my arm underneath her and my chest, the weight of her new baby fat, and I held her until she slept; then I walked to the couch, and sat with her against me, sleeping. I held her like that for an hour, savoring it, knowing the quick slide of time and how soon she'd be grown up (look how fast Danielle's oldest, Alice, had gone from baby to little girl), how swiftly any of this could be taken, I savored this gentle sleep, my daughter, what I wish Stella was here for and Mary could see and have for herself, until I dozed off myself, until Amanda woke up again.

*

RESEARCH

- *Practitioners have ready access to lethal drugs and know how to use them.*

*

POWDER HILL

Jeannie's home from an early shift at the orchard. She's apologetic. *I didn't mean to take your job*, she says. She comes over to watch Amanda while she naps, and I slip out for Tony. I told Jeannie I had to run to the store. She's happy to watch Amanda. "Delighted!" she says. She loves it when I ask for favors. She's bored with her boys away all summer. She brings George Bush so that Amanda can meet him when she wakes up.

Simon yips and jumps in front of George, raises his rear in the air, tail wagging, front legs down, hoping for play—running around the house with the black kitten. George Bush has a tiny white spot on his nose, and that white-tipped tail, and he meows and jumps and skits around the house, up the stairs, clinging to the curtains. I think about the mess they'll make while I'm gone, knocking things over, breaking who knows what, but I don't care. I have an hour. I go.

I take Tony up Powder Hill, to the old trail that runs up behind the Town Hall. Into the woods, beneath the pines and birches and maples, up along the great wall of rock, ten feet high.

"Bluets," I say, pointing to the tiny blue flowers. Tony chases me, shouts, *yabbadabbadoo!*, laughs. Goofy. I laugh, too.

A quarter of a mile from this trail, there is a vernal pool that forms with spring run-off, where salamanders and frogs hatch. The trail leading to it is full of mud, and the mosquitoes buzz thick. Biting, biting.

"Have you seen Alan?" he says.

There's the sound of needles under our feet, the slip of climbing the hill on the needles. Bluets line the trail. I don't want to talk about it now. I can't say it. I can't repeat what I heard. It's stuck somewhere, deep, inside.

"No," I say.

"I think it'll make you feel better," he says, "to know. Wouldn't it?"

"Might make me feel worse," I say.

We get to the top of the hill, two miles up, crunching through leaves that will never be cleared, that will rot and turn to fertilizer. And there, at the top, is the brick house, ten by ten, with just a doorway and four walls and a roof. A small room. We go inside, and it's cool, between these brick walls. I lean against the far wall. He leans across from me.

I tell him: "They built the house in 1812, to store the ammunition. Before that, they'd kept it under the pulpit in the church. But they realized that was foolish—they could blow up the church. So they built this house for forty-eight dollars in bricks. At the top of the hill. All that gunpowder stored inside, so now this is called Powder Hill."

And how do I know the story of Powder Hill? How do I know?

Gerald. Gerald tells me. I think of Gerald's face, and push him away from me again. Not now. The gap, the silence, that is why—

I step forward. Once, twice. I smell Tony and I dream of leaning into him and kissing him. I see it in my mind's eye. I start to lean forward, because—who cares? Gerald's with Nadine every day, and now a night spent with her. What can I do that he hasn't?

I am here, and I am with Tony. Avec lui. Words that come to me in French now, slipping up from my mind as if they found the path that was hidden for years.

“That was a good history lesson,” he says.

He leans forward, too, and it is happening, I’m giving in to this! Finally. I can nearly touch his lips with mine.

And then, at the very last moment, when our lips are grazing and I can taste his breath, he puts his hand against my chest, by my collarbone, and says, “No.”

I step back, embarrassed. Have I misunderstood, all this time? This isn’t what he wants? Didn’t he say he loves me? He did. He said that.

“No,” I say. “Okay. No.”

I lean against the wall again. My heart beats hard. The bricks are cool against my back, where my tank top leaves my skin exposed.

“I have to—t” he says.

“No?”

“Let me tell you something.”

“Okay,” I say.

He puts out one hand, palm up, a request.

“I had an affair.”

I’m stunned. I shake my head.

“Since you’ve been here?”

He laughs. “God, no. No! What do you think I am?”

He takes a step towards me and puts one hand on my shoulder, then leans back again.

“In my *marriage*. I had an affair.”

It swoops down on me now, the knowing: Tony has always been a ladies man, like my mother said. My father adored him, wished I would marry that character Tony and not staid old Gerald. Tony was at our house so much when we were little that he was like my father’s long lost son, the one he’d always wished for, whom Mary could never quite become no matter how hard she tried.

“Ah,” I say.

His green eyes, his apologetic smile, half-lifted.

“So, you didn’t just drift apart, then?” I say. I put my hands behind my back, underneath my hips.

“We did. After the affair.” He nods and chuckles.

I shake my head. “Not funny,” I say.

He shrugs and his smile drops.

“I agree. My wife didn’t find it funny, either.”

He looks down at the floor. Shoves a short stick into the middle of the floor, between us.

“How long was the affair?”

“A year. We worked together. She was an insurance agent, and we took business trips together sometimes.”

Business trips. My mouth waters at the thought of it—a business trip, up in a plane, at an airport, in a strange town, with a hotel bed and a hotel shower and all that quiet.

“I’ve been thinking, since last time we were together,” he says, “and I shouldn’t do this to you. To Gerald.”

“Now you have a conscience about Gerald?”

He watches me. Waits.

“Gerald’s screwing his coworker!” I say.

He watches me. Shakes his head. Those green eyes.

“I don’t think so, June. We had beers before the wedding, and he talked about you, and his book, and Amanda.”

I throw up my arms. “This is so unfair. The man I’m ready to sleep with feels for my husband. Jesus.” I laugh. “My students would say this is so *ironic*.”

He shakes his head.

“He’s a good guy. Solid. Like you said.”

I snort, the sound of a horse.

“What I said, though,” he says. “That was true.”

“What you said?”

I know what he means, but I don’t want to assume—or, I want to hear it now, in person.

“You’re going to make me say it again?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

Now I smirk. I lean back against the wall. And he says, “I love you, Junie Roe. And maybe there’s a reason you haven’t married Gerald yet. Maybe, you should leave him and be with me.”

The house goes blurry, and I'm in a fog. Leave Gerald and be with Tony—there it is, the proposition that I've been waiting for, in some part of myself. As if I can't just leave Gerald on my own but need another man to take me away. I hate myself for thinking this way. But, it's an excuse to go. A reason to leave.

Is that what I want? *Quitter mon marie?* Except that he's not my husband. We never got married. Is Tony right? Is my hesitation not just Mary's accident but something deeper? The warnings that Mary gave me, before the accident, that this wasn't the life for me? My own doubts? I want Mary's advice. I want my older sister.

In the woods behind us, there's the snap of twigs, and then the sound of someone running off. I step past Gerald, through the doorway, and catch a glimpse of white dashing through the trees. A deer tail raised? But no, it looked more like a dress in the wind. Disappearing into the green.

*

RESEARCH

- *Veterinarians philosophically accept euthanasia as a way to alleviating suffering.*
- *Exposure to suicides among colleagues may result in "suicide contagion."*

Is that what she had, suicide contagion? Because she saw their friend, that morning? But she was tired—that's what it was. She'd been working too hard. She was, maybe, high, but she wanted to live. She did. She wanted to live.

CHAPTER 4

GUNSHOT

RABBI RONNIE CAHANA: MALADIE DE L'EMMURE VIVANTE

A stroke in the brain stem, which blocks the blood to the rest of the brain and causes paralysis. I open Mary's veterinary manual to see where the brain stem is, and how it connects to the frontal lobe. There's a diagram, as if the brain has been cut in half. Cross-section. And there's the mass of white matter, the frontal lobe, the cerebrum, the ventricles—all the terms that doctors have repeated over and over to me. We haven't talked about the brain stem, though, because that's not the source of Mary's problem. Her problem is trauma to the cerebrum. Damaged white matter, bruises, dead sites of transmission. I have read that you can reawaken the wires—synapses—by making new synapses around the spaces where the old ones lived, and now, that's what's happening with her speech, the way it returns in nonsense fragments. The way they'll eventually form words—I am sure, even if no one else will affirm it.

But for Rabbi Ronnie, the change is coming with the reawakening of the brain stem, its allowance of signals into the mid-brain, hypothalamus, and cerebellum, where muscle movement and nerves live. He never lost the ability to move his eyes, nor to think clearly and to generate words. He never lost what Mary lost, but he did lose the power to control his body.

One of his daughters wanders the halls, and she stops and talks to me when I return from the vending machine. In one hand, I hold another can of Coke. I don't want to drink soda because I know it saps my bones of calcium and will leave me with the same osteoporosis my mother has now, but the sweetness and the caffeine are alluring here, and I give in to the temptation. And it's cool in my hand, and keeps me in this moment, focused on the cool and the saccharine flavor.

"Hi," she says, rubbing her neck.

“Hey there,” I say.

Her name is Evelyn. We met last week and she told me that her father is healing. She told me that he’s a rabbi, and that she and her mother and sister will be by his side through all of this. *All of this*. I wonder if she knows what that means, yet.

“You have a lot of visitors,” I say. “That’s good.”

I’ve seen people streaming in and out every day since their arrival. No one has given up on Rabbi Ronnie Cahana. I pop open the top of the Coke : psssh sound, releasing air.

“It helps us,” she says, “to have so much support.” She nods and watches me. I try not to wince, or to look down at my hands, but to hold her gaze, and not to be envious. But I let my eyes drop and take a sip of Coke. Then look at her again and smile.

“That’s good,” I say.

She nods, her eyes still on mine. I’m uncomfortable with her gaze. I feel like she can see the truth of what I’m feeling.

“I’d love to meet your sister,” she says.

“Oh.” I look at the can, its red exterior, the glimmer of the C. There’s a polar bear on one side, their new advertising gimmick. On TV, at Christmas time, the bear makes happy grunting sounds when he drinks a Coke in the Arctic.

“If you’re comfortable with that, I mean.”

She holds out her hands, palms up and open. I bet she does a lot of yoga and talks about *being in the now*. I look up. Her eyes are deep brown, and she’s kind, I can

tell. She wants to help. Her offer to visit was one of sympathy, generosity. I need to stop being so sardonic.

“Yes, yes,” I say, collapsing into her offer. “Please, yes.”

When we walk into Mary’s room, and I introduce them as if Mary is ready to shake Evelyn’s hand, Evelyn reaches out and puts her hand on Mary’s, and she says, “Good to meet you, Mary. So good to meet you.”

She doesn’t turn away or act uncomfortable. She doesn’t talk in a syrupy voice as if Mary is a baby again—all the things others have done. She keeps her hand on Mary’s, and she tells her, “I know that this is hard for you and for your family. But I want to tell you what my father says. He’s locked-in, down the hall from you. And he said last week that ‘Paradise is in this body, is in this world.’”

It’s a strange thing to say to a woman who cannot move or speak. Does she think that this is Mary’s paradise? That this is how she wanted to spend her life? Not tending animals and being with her family, or even her string of boyfriends, but here, in this hospital bed, in limbo? Trying to speak but saying words that don’t make any sense yet? My first judgment of her was right.

Evelyn stands and says, “Come visit us soon, down the hall. Okay?”

“Sure,” I say.

I give her a grimace of a smile, an attempt that doesn’t come off right, I know, but she squeezes my upper arm on her way past and walks out, ignoring my expression or not-seeing, I don’t know. And she goes back to her father’s room, which I heard her mother call “a temple of healing.” On Monday. To a visitor. A temple of healing. And I thought, Why can’t *I* construct a temple of healing for Mary? Where

have all of *her* supporters gone? Where has all of the good-energy and hope for *Mary* gone? And I feel this as my failing. Alone, facing my sister, Coke in hand, I am despondent, suddenly. I throw the can into the trash, though it's still full. It thuds to on the bottom, and the liquid spills out *sssshhhh*. The room feels emptier now that Evelyn's visited and gone.

GUNSHOT

I put Amanda to bed, read her *The Velveteen Rabbit*, her favorite this summer.

“Night, Little Bird,” I say.

“Night, Momma.”

Her eyes are already closed, and her finger's in her mouth. I pull the quilt up over her shoulders and run my hand across her hair, still damp from the bath. Down the hall, Gerald sleeps. I can hear him snoring. It's gotten worse this year. The doctor told him: It's stress.

The house is quiet, dark. And I could slip away. I could just slip away into the darkness.

I walk downstairs, to the back door, and sit on the patio. The chair back is cool even through my nightgown. The old oak tree shadows the moon, dapples the stone wall. Simon whines from inside.

If I lose the orchard money, and if Gerald loses his job, if Gerald loses his job and we have to live on my teaching salary, and what I make at the orchard in the summertime—and all those bills. How will we ever pay all those bills? What will happen with this house, if we're foreclosed? What will happen if they take our car?

I hear Dr. Smalls talking, his voice saying, “It’s time, you have to choose this.”
And how he’s put himself on the line for us.

But I cannot, I *can’t*.

From the darkness, from the woods, comes the yip-yip-howl of the coyotes.
Singing all in chorus. Simon barks back, wants to find them. Pushes his nose at the
door. The clatter of the wood in the frame. Far off, I hear a gunshot. Someone’s
shooting in the woods. Ed? With his rifle, at night? Probably drunk. Watch out, deer.

RETRACE

Very late, in the quiet, when no one can hear: Amanda is asleep, Gerald is asleep, both
of them dreaming down the hall, me in my little room. The door is closed. It is quiet.
Far off, I can hear four ninety-five, the blur of traffic, a vibration through the ground.
Shift my weight in the chair and the floor creaks. This old house. Maybe soon we’ll
get the living room done. Maybe we’ll have my mother move in after all. Or, once
Mary’s better, it will be hers. Gerald shakes his head at me when I talk like this. Stella
hangs up the phone. They are both fed up. They don’t know why I can’t *just accept it*.

I pull out the pad and my pen, and I write. Magdalene Tetrault, whose husband
died, whose son was raised by two uncles. She began to see her husband in the
nighttime, as a bird. Never the same sort of bird but always changing, landing nearby,
singing. *Il y avait un oiseau hier soir. Il me chante*. He sings to me. She wouldn’t let
him go, so he was always close. She was safe that way; she didn’t have to risk
anything. That’s what she said at the end—that hanging onto him was hiding, and
letting him go would be brave. I knew this once, when I translated the poems. Then I

tucked it away and forgot, for a very long time. And now I don't know. *Is that the brave thing? To let go? Or is that giving up? What would her husband have wanted? What would Mary want? I don't think I'd ever want her to give up on me. I'd be afraid to be left alone there in the hospital. There are all those miraculous recoveries, stories of people whose chances were minimal, next to nothing, and they came back. Paradise is in this body. She can return. It's not the same as grieving over a death. She's still here. Still alive. We can still work to save her.*

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CRISP

That night, I sit on the patio, making calculations, adding up the bills. I think of Danielle and Terence, both of them disappointed in me. And I realize that I can make this right—I'll save my job, and my friendship with Danielle, and I stay up all night baking, seven pies, blueberry. Fourteen baskets of blueberries waited in the fridge, and now, they're thick, sugary, sweet, and nested in my special crust, a recipe from my grandmother. Amanda sleeps. Gerald comes in at eleven, waves hello, and goes right upstairs to bed. My wonderful life. A mess of my own creation, I know. When I take the last pie out of the oven, perfectly browned, I go to the couch, four a.m., and sleep for two hours. Then, I load them all into the car, still warm, and drive for the orchard.

When I drop off the pies, there is Jeannie, standing behind the counter.

"Hey, June!" she says. She waves big, smiles. Twists the back of her hair, then stops herself and holds her hands tight in front of her.

“Hey,” I say.

“What’s the matter?” she says. She twists her fingers. She’s wearing the McNally Orchards apron, tied tight around her waist, a little bow in front. She’s put on red lipstick to match the red apple logo.

“Nothing.”

Of course, Danielle hired Jeannie. She probably called her yesterday afternoon when she was furious with me, when I was still out walking with Tony around the pond. Meandering under the big pines. Being replaced.

I walk past Jeannie, then stop short. “Have you heard gunshots at night, Jeannie?”

She laughs a little, then clears her throat. “Ed got a rifle. A twenty-two. He’s been hunting the coyote. Well, first he set up a target in the backyard, and now he’s tracking them through the woods to find the den.”

“A *gun*? With our kids around?”

“It’s at night,” she says. “It’s safe at night. Season opens in October, so he’s practicing.”

“To hunt the coyotes?”

She shrugs. “Course,” she says. “Half the new people in town are gonna join him. He’s helping them buy rifles and learn to shoot. Ed Heinz is training them.”

“Ed Heinz?” The bigot, Ed Heinz, who’s leading this brigade against Romero?

She nods.

Forget it, I think, not now, and walk to the back of the barn. “Danielle?” I call.

“Dan?”

She's not in the office to the right, not in the gazebo out back, not in the barn in the back of the yard, or the office there. I set the pies down on the office table—big pine oval made by Ben Willis just for the orchard, all one piece of wood—and walk to the house.

Carla and Bruce walk past me, he with his hand in her back pocket. I give them a weary grin.

“Hey, June,” he says and nods his chin up at me. He's becoming a young man now? Too cool with the chin-nod? Now he's calling me June, too?

“Hi, kids,” I say.

As they walk by, Carla whispers something to Bruce and they both laugh. “Oh my god,” says Carla, and laughs again. “At the pond?” she says.

I try to ignore them. At the pond, at the pond—was it them in the woods? Have they seen? I turn to the door, knock twice and push it open. She's out back with Alice. Cereal morning. Laughing.

“Hey,” she says when she sees me.

“Uh hunh.”

“What's the matter?”

“You're not going to say it, then?”

“Say what, Junie?”

She turns to me, still holding the spoon. It's a tiny baby spoon, blue-handled, the rounded metal coated in orange cheese. Nan kicks the chair and whines for more.

“Momma,” says Alice. “Nan's hungry.”

“I know, sweetie,” says Danielle. Nan is Alice’s baby doll, a gift from Mrs. McCrae, handmade.

She turns to Alice and smiles. Turns back to me. Spoons an imaginary mouthful up for Nan. Alice holds Nan up to the spoon, and makes chewing sounds.

“You hired Jeannie?”

Danielle shrugs. “I needed someone.”

“So you replace me with *Jeannie*?”

“What do you care, Junie? You’re barely here these days, and you come and go as you please, leaving me high and dry” she says. She turns to me. Her face is red. Her jaw is set. This is Danielle angry, and she will stay this way for a long time now, I know. She’s never been angry with me, not like this, but I have seen her this way with Terence and with her mother. It will last, and then, eventually, it might fade.

Alice looks at me, ashamed for my misbehavior, her head down, eyes up.

“Jeannie’s been begging to work here all summer. We talked about it again at the party last week. I said I’d think about it, and yesterday, we sealed the deal.”

Great. Sealed the deal.

“I’ve been trying to help you all summer,” she says, “but you don’t want to be helped. You just keep making things harder and harder for yourself. And what you’re doing to Gerald? I can’t even talk about that it makes me so angry.”

She shakes her head.

“Nan’s full,” says Alice.

Danielle lowers the spoon.

“I’m not doing anything to Gerald that he hasn’t already done to me,” I say.

She leans back and crosses her arms.

“Sure, Junie,” she says.

I shake my head, so tired of all of this discord.

“Look, I made your pies,” I say. “I left them in the barn with Jeannie. Okay? Seven blueberry pies.”

Something in her posture softens a little. Her arms lower slightly, still crossed but not so adamantly.

“Thanks,” she says. “That will save us for today.”

I want reconciliation. I want this to be okay. I want her to understand why I talk to Tony. And that that’s all it is—just talk. How I need him.

“Did Jeannie tell you she named her cat George Bush?” I say, reaching for a joke we could laugh about together.

“Oh, yeah,” she says. She smiles, and then her face glosses cold again. She won’t let me off so easily.

I want to ask her what’s happening with Romero. I want to ask if she ever talked to Omar and Romero about bringing the other workers. I want to remind her that she’s not perfect, either.

“See you later, then,” I say.

Usually, we’d laugh about Jeannie, how ridiculous it was for her to name her cat George Bush, how she’s over-reacting about the coyotes, how we need to find a way to protect the coyotes, the CSA, and most of all, now, how to help Romero in the face of the ridiculous investigation. But today? Nothing.

Just before I go, she says, “Oh, Junie. I almost forgot to tell you. Nadine’s been here with a lawyer, talking with Romero. She’s been so helpful, a godsend.”

Her face when she delivers this news is hard and cold, not the Danielle I know but her cruel alter-ego. She’s chosen the thing she knows will hurt me most, the thing about which I’ve been complaining to her all summer, confiding in her my fears and insecurities.

“That’s what you wanted to say?” I say.

“Yeah,” she says.

“Go to hell, Danielle.”

“Oh, look!” She points at me. “A poem! That’s your first in ages!”

I shake my head, feel myself crying, but try to hold it in. She can’t know she’s gotten to me. I’m not going to break now.

“Nice,” I say.

I turn to the door, walk through the house, the darkness of it a blur. Out the front door, into the sun, into the yard, past the barn around the side, into the car, slam the door, where the air is contained and hot and stifling. I lean my head onto the wheel. Roll down my window. Wait until my head is clear, until I am not spinning anymore.

Why did you quit translating? said Tony two weeks ago, in the woods. *It was what you loved—why did you stop?* But—I wanted to say—I’ve started again, since you came back.

That look on Danielle’s face, her hatred of me. I’ve never seen that look. No matter what I did, what either of us did, it was reparable. There’s sick pinch of the car’s contained heat in my nose, sinking to my stomach.

Why did you stop?

Because I was afraid I was a fraud. Because I was punishing myself. Because I stayed in Michigan when I should have come home for Mary, when I knew she wasn’t well. I had Gerald. I had my translations. I knew that I was pregnant. I was happy, and I relished in it instead of facing Mary and her problems—instead of *complicating* my life. I was always jealous of her, the one with all the beauty, all the attention. I wanted some of it for myself. I wanted to feel what it was to have this sweet, cloistered life. I don’t deserve any of this. I deserve to lose it all. I begged her to come to Bolton the weekend I was home, to try on her dress, and it was then—then she drove back, got on 495, and hit the divider. I begged her and I knew she’d come, because she always came when I asked. The car is still spinning. My head won’t clear. One leg goes lame and other injuries follow. It can’t be helped. We overcompensate. We hurt from favoring one over the other. The injuries spread. I lean out the window, and then comes the quick heave of sickness. It spills down the side of the car.

A FURY

Willow Smalls, Dr. Small’s daughter, has three baby girls. On my way to the bank, this afternoon, depositing my last orchard check—six hundred thirty-five dollars—I see Willow shifting the youngest from hip to hip, two in a stroller. She was married

twice, both failed. I heard in high school that she'd tried to kill herself, then ran away from home, then was found by her father and brought back and put into the psych ward at Walcott Hospital. Danielle's father was on the board, so he found out somehow and told Danielle's mother one night when we were juniors, and Danielle overheard and told me the very next morning in Home Ec, where we were making aprons. Mine was turquoise with red stripes. I couldn't sew in a straight line, so the apron never looked right; it was all askew, off-kilter, like it was made for a mad chef.

Willow was at Imago with me, then the public middle school. But she went to the high school in Brownstone, a private high school a mile away from Bolton High, very elite, because her parents thought it was a better place.

Willow looks tired now, her eyes sagging a little too much for a woman her age, her hips narrow and thin, dark hair always in need of a trim, spread like a broom at the back of her head.

"Hi, Willow," I say. I want to keep walking, pass each other by like we usually do, but she stops and says, "How've you been?"

She was the one who found Mary and called for help. Of all people, Willow. The first year, every time I saw her, I'd ask what Mary said, where exactly—*exactly*—was she, what else does Willow remember? 'She was unconscious,' says Willow, 'she was in bad shape, that's all I know.'

"Junie." She puts on a big smile now, like we're old pals and ought to catch up, if only we had time.

"Hi, girls," I say, and lean forward.

"Good summer?" she says.

“Pretty good, busy, you know.” I roll my eyes. I want to run into the bank, make this deposit, and run home before Gerald leaves for work.

“I notice you’ve been out hiking a lot. At the pond, and all.”

My heart skips.

“At the pond?”

“Mm.” She purses her lips. “Last week. And up at Powder Hill.”

The snap in the trees, the white dress, was it her?

“Well, same as always, of course. Danielle and I are there all the time.”

Willow smiles.

“Sure,” she says.

I touch her daughter’s cheek, the one on Willow’s hip, and say, “Your girls are growing fast.” I wave to the two in the stroller. The older one, who wears a purple sweatshirt and black sneakers, kicks one foot against the footrest, waves back, and gives me a gummy smile.

“We’re off to the orchard, so I’d better run.”

Willow shifts the baby up, a jounce. The baby holds on tighter to Willow’s collar, little hands clenched tight. The baby gurgles, drools a little down her chin. She has a full head of black hair, just like Willow’s boyfriend Mike. The other two are blonde like Willow was when she was young. Willow dyes her hair now, a deep, false black, nearly blue.

“Yeah,” she says, “I have to get the girls home to feed them or they’ll start fussing up a storm and my breasts’ll leak right through this shirt.”

She shifts the baby up again and grabbed the stroller with her free hand and pushes the children through the storm of blowing leaves on the sidewalk, which were picking up speed, swirling in a tiny furious tornado at our feet.

When I get home, there's a man with a clipboard standing beside a tow truck. Waiting for me. The tow truck lights spin, letting Jeannie and Ed know that we're in this kind of trouble. Shit. Shit shit shit. The car. I pull into the driveway. I sit for a minute, before I get out to face him. I grip the steering wheel. This isn't happening. It just isn't. I breathe in, breathe out, and he comes and knocks on my window. An apologetic look. Says, "Ma'am?"

* * *

VENTILATOR

The day after Dara Singh slipped into a coma that would last seven years, Mom walked us down to the bus stop, which she never did. Usually, if she was not in one of her sadnesses, the vacuum started up as soon as we were out the front door. Or she'd say goodbye as she walked to the kitchen sink, the water already filling up the sink with suds, or she'd head to the basement to work on a quilt. But that day, she held our hands down that long windy driveway that we'd sled in winter. A quarter mile. Sometimes we ran down it with our hands held out, letting the hill take us down, letting our legs go. But that day, it was cold and we were bundled in coats that were

too tight for running and shouting, and besides, Mom was sad. Just one of her sad days.

I remember the yellow bus pulled up to our stop, and Mom stood there holding our hands and putting us on the bus. She never waited with us. It was early, six am. We were at the beginning of the bus route and got picked up earliest. Even though they said it would get up to sixty-five by the afternoon, it was still only in the forties. Cold, and the wind blew at our bare hands. Her fingers were cold.

We stepped up those big steps and the smell of rubber seats came at us and Mrs. Barnston said, “Morning, kids,” like this was any other day.

As we pulled away, I looked out the window and saw Mom cry. I stood up, pulled the two clips together on the window and slid the top half down and said, “Mom?” But before she could say anything back, we pulled away. “Head in, Junie,” Mrs. Barnston said. She looked at me in the giant rectangular mirror that hung up front. I could see her eyes watching me, her permed hair bouncing. I sat back down.

The next morning, Mom would pack our lunches while she told us about Dara, her hands going wild back and forth, spreading peanut butter, spreading jelly, shoving the two pressed slices into plastic bags. Three apples into paper bags and three apple juices. She forgot to cut Stella’s sandwich into triangles. I saw and knew Stella wouldn’t eat her lunch, but I didn’t say anything. Mary got up and tried to help, but Mom pushed her aside with one hand, a swat at the air. Mary sat back down beside us. And then the phone rang and Mom shifted in a way I thought only she could. Her

voice went swiftly to sweet. And she was caught up in a different world, saying, “Uh-huh,” and, “I know, isn’t it?” and, “Three o’clock.”

Mary breathed beside me. Stella stared up at Mom, put her pointer finger in her mouth. Mom looked at us. Her hair was wavy to her chin. Her eyes were brown like Dad’s. She wore the same orange robe every morning, something her college-friend-Nancy-in-California sent her last year for Christmas. Mom said it’s the color monks wear. You know, the monks in Nepal. Said it’s soothing.

“Will you get your bags together, girls?”

We ran upstairs, chasing each other. Stella said, “Can’t catch me!”

I shouted, “You’re a slowpoke, Stell!”

And Mary said, “Stop being babies.”

We were at the top of the stairs, the carpet soft beneath our feet. I remember the wall behind her was textured in thick putty swirls, and cream-colored.

I said, “Yeah, Stell, cut it out.”

Mary gave me a look. “Be good,” she said. “Mom’s having a hard day.”

“I’m ten. I know how to be *good*. Don’t tell me I’m a baby.”

“Then don’t act like a baby.”

“Don’t be so bossy.”

“I’m older than you. Someone has to be mature around here.”

“Oh yeah, you’re so mature.”

“See?”

“You’re such a know-it-all.”

“I’m in charge. I’m the oldest. You’re being a baby.”

I looked at her, the long black hair, the blue blue eyes, the perfect skin and long piano fingers and legs that could dance and the numbers she could add and divide and multiply in her head, and the poems she knew by heart and the science she could teach us all—the way a plant grew by sunlight, the way a human heart pumped blood. She knew all of this, and she could make people laugh and she could charm them, too. Dad loved talking to Mary, because she understood all the physics things that Stella and I could not. Everyone in town was wooed by Mary.

I saw all of that when I looked at her, and I felt a swift rage that rose up through me. I wanted to scream, push, tear down a wall, pull at the ceiling so that the house collapsed in on us like a tent.

“I am not a baby!” I screamed.

And as I said it, I pushed Mary hard, right at her collar bone. I felt it, for the smallest second, under my hands as I pushed her away from me. I pushed her hard, harder than I meant to, before I even knew what I was doing, and she stepped backwards. She landed on one foot, stumbled, tried to catch herself. I remember it all happened very slowly. I pushed her and very, very slowly, she fell.

The Matisse print on the wall, blue people dancing in a circle. Last week Stella asked, Are they naked or wearing blue clothes? We all laughed. Jester at the bottom of the stairs. He barked, his mouth opening-then-closing, the sound of the bark finding us sometime later. Mary’s eyes—big and blue and shocked. The look she gave me, which was disappointment. Confusion. Betrayal. She felt betrayed. *How could you have, Junie?* I felt it underneath my skin.

Twenty minutes later. A day later. Years and years later and I sit beside Mary telling her a story at the hospital, and I remember this, and I say again how sorry I am.

She did not catch herself with that foot. She stumbled further back, and one step more. And then her heel was nowhere; it was in the air, stepping on nothing, and she looked for the floor beneath her feet. She looked at me. Reached out her hands. Her blue eyes open wide. She tried to catch herself, she reached for me to help her, to catch her, to hold her here, up top, where it was safe. To undo what I did.

I leaned forward, both hands out—what I had done hit me a second too late, even less than a second, the slice of a second too late, a sliver, a little moon of time too late.

Stella shrieked.

I grabbed Mary's hand, felt it for a moment in my palm, and then it slipped away. I couldn't hold her. I leapt forward. She tumbled down the stairs, back first. She bounced on the carpet. *She will be okay, she will be okay.*

At the bottom of the stairs, she landed on the slate. On her head, the sound like a coconut hitting earth from its tree. A sickening sound. Something hollow. Something I will remember forever. I feel it in my own body like an echo. Like a punch.

And then time caught up with us again and we were moving fast: "What happened?" said Mom, orange blur, hands touching Mary all over.

"Don't move her," I said. I'd just taken first aid in health class. "Don't move a trauma victim," Mr. Harvey said. "You could make things worse."

"Call an ambulance!" said Mom, and I ran for the phone in the kitchen.

Mary was laughing, hysterical. Mom said, "Don't move."

Mary would not stop laughing.

“What is the nature of your emergency?” said the woman’s voice.

I didn’t tell her that I pushed Mary. I told her: “My sister fell down the stairs. She hit her head.”

They let us all ride to the hospital in the ambulance, even though we barely fit. Mom didn’t think to call a neighbor. She was busy telling Mary not to move. Mary started laughing as soon as she hit the floor. She laughed like a maniac, like she’d been told the funniest joke in the world. I held onto Stella’s hand and hoped that was a good sign. But then, in the ambulance, she started crying, just as hard, and she wouldn’t stop. She didn’t know where she was. She said she had a test to take. Had she taken her test yet? And Mom said, “Yes, Mary, you’re okay, you took it.” This is how she talks to Stella when she sleepwalks. She plays along so Stella doesn’t wake up and get scared.

Stella sat on my lap in the ambulance, and I sat on a white metal box in the corner. Mom sat beside Mary, holding her hand, and the paramedics were Mr. Tullywater and Jimmy Tooth, men who played basketball with Dad sometimes. Dad told us Jimmy Tooth traveled.

They put a clear mask on Mary’s face and said it was oxygen to help her breathe. It fogged up as she breathed out and went clear again as she breathed in. I watched to make sure she kept on breathing. They put a pencil flashlight to both her eyes. They glanced at each other over her head, a glance that meant something I didn’t understand. I worried they knew the truth of what I did.

We bounced and swerved, onto the highway, to Concord, three towns away, to the hospital. I prayed that I hadn't killed Mary. I prayed that I wasn't a monster. Danielle was into horror movies then and told me some people are just mean at heart. I thought I might be one of those people. I might be a psychopath killer. I'd end up in an asylum like Tim at the end of *Tim's Last Hunt*, with his hands bound in that white coat, the linoleum tiles all shiny behind me. Beige. Everything in my life would be beige—the walls and the trays and the ceilings. I would be the sister the family is ashamed of, the one they visit once a month at *the pen*. Stella would have to tell her friends that she was going to see her sister at the state *pen*. And Mary would be gone, all that potential lost, and it would be my fault. Because I pushed her, I pushed her down the stairs without even meaning to. She's taller than me and stronger. I didn't think she'd fall. I never thought she'd fall.

But what scared me was, in that second before I pushed her, I hated her. I was so angry, and I wanted her to hurt. To not be her perfect self. To leave us alone for a minute and not be the oldest one and not be the most beautiful and to leave a little space in our sad mother's heart for us, for me and Stella. I was plain jealous. So I pushed her.

"I didn't mean to! I didn't mean to push her that hard! I'm sorry, I didn't mean to!"

Everyone – Mom and Mr. Tullywater and Jimmy Tooth – they all turned to look at me, and I realized that it was me talking, my voice screaming. Mom looked at me and didn't say a word. She looked back down at Mary, who was crying by then and saying, "My head, Mom, it hurts."

“It’s a good sign,” said Jimmy. “She’ll be okay, Junie. Don’t worry.”

Stella spun around in my lap and hugged me around the neck, so tight I could hardly breathe. I didn’t mind. I thought she was holding me together.

Stella and I sat in the waiting room for a long time, and finally, Mom came out and said Mary would be fine.

“Junie,” says Mom—but then Mrs. Singh came up behind her. She touched her shoulder lightly, one brush of a finger and Mom turned. Mrs. Singh wore white, an all-white sari, and her mother was there, her long gray hair tied back. Her eyes were milky.

“Parmita,” said Mom. “How’s Dara?”

Mrs. Singh shook her head back and forth. Her eyes were watery and red.

“I’m so sorry,” said Mom.

I stared up at them.

Mom took her by the shoulder, and they walked away like that, side by side.

Her grandmother followed behind them, sad. Alone.

Mom was always good at taking pain away. She knew when to comfort, when to listen, when to offer up words of sympathy or hope, like with Mrs. McCrae. I knew then that Dara was gone, but the knowing didn’t find me yet. I was still thinking of Mary. I could not fathom Dara’s death. She was our neighbor. She lived around the corner. She walked past our house every day. She could not have died. Little girls did not die, or slip into comas that went on for years.

I walked around the corner to see Mary. When she looked up, her blue eyes clearer, she smiled and said, "It's okay, Junie."

I thought of Dara, the headlights on her body in the night, her cheekbones. The dark hollows of her eyes. I thought of her body floating in the pond, and her brother tugging her to shore. I thought of him sitting outside on the front steps of his big blue house. Thought of him smiling and waving as we drove by.

I wanted to tell Mary: For a second, I wanted to hurt you. I wanted to offer up the truth.

But I didn't. She forgave what she thought was just an accident, and I could not tell her otherwise. So I hugged her, and I promised I would never do anything like that again, and I meant it. I would never hate her that way. I would never push against her. Mary could not help who she was. Could not help how people loved her. She was my sister, and she was always good to me. Always. I promised myself I would be good to her, too, that I would take care of her as she takes care of me. I pressed my face into her raven hair and closed my eyes and rested there.

* * *

COYOTE

In the morning, Jeannie comes over in tears, knocks on the screen door and hollers, "Juuuune!"

I'm upstairs with Amanda, getting her dressed, and she's screaming because she hates putting on the pants I've chosen. They barely fit over her diaper and are

made for toddlers who are potty trained (Amanda is not yet, as all the new women like to remind me when I show up with her diapers at pre-school). I was saving them, but she's growing so fast she'll never even wear them if not now, and besides, it's all that's left that clean.

"Noo, no no no," she says. She squirms on the floor, rolls back and forth, whimpers. The pants are halfway up her legs, to her knees, and she kicks her legs to get them off.

"Up here!" I say to Jeannie. Perfect timing. "Sweetie, please. Your other pants are filthy."

I lift her up and try to pull the pants up over her diaper. She squirms, tilts against me, grabs my shirt in her fists, wails in my ear.

I hear Jeannie pounding up the stairs.

"You will *not* believe this, June," she says from the hallway.

Amanda wails even louder.

"Fine, you win," I say. "You win. I'm sorry. These are going to be uncomfortable all day, anyway."

The truth is, I've let the laundry pile up for days. Afternoons with Tony, evenings with

Tony—any empty space in a day is his. "Shit," I say.

"Junie," says Jeannie. She's in the doorway behind me now.

I kneel in front of Amanda and pull the pants off; she's down to a whimper now.

“I know, baby, I’m sorry. That was a bad idea.”

I scoop her up and hold her in my lap, then shift my body towards Jeannie. She’s holding something red and limp in her hands. A torn coat, black and white fur and blood.

“What is *that*?”

“Those coyotes, Junie. They got George W.”

And then, I see that it’s the kitten, the bloody carcass of her cat, fur matted, belly gutted, legs hanging.

I cover Amanda’s eyes with one hand.

“She doesn’t know what it is.” Jeannie shakes her head. “Those coyotes killed my baby. And just *left* him to suffer. I heard something screaming in the night, and I knew it was him.”

She starts to cry.

“What that?” says Amanda, and points to the carcass.

“Amanda, can you go get Mommy’s hairbrush for her? On my sink?”

“K,” she says, and scoots off my lap, heading for the bathroom.

I stand up and take Jeannie by the shoulders and walk her downstairs.

“I’m going to kill those animals if it’s the last thing I do,” she says. “I’ll send Ed out tonight.”

“I’m so sorry about George. What a tragedy. But no one needs to kill anything else.

Right? That would just make things worse.”

“Why’d we ever help those coyotes survive, anyway?” She holds the carcass

closer, rubs her face with one hand, leaving a stripe of blood down her cheek and smeared on the collar of her white shirt.

“I got it, Momma!” Amanda shouts, and comes down the stairs one step at a time—both feet on the step before she steps down to the next one.

“Good job, sweetie.”

I walk Jeannie out the front door, the screen slamming behind us.

“Jeannie, I want you to take George home, and we’ll bury him together tonight, okay? Can you call Ed at work and have him come home to help you?”

She nods. “Yeah,” she says. “Yeah, he’ll help me. Set some traps. Get out his gun.”

“Maybe not the gun. But—okay,” I say. Behind the screen, Amanda says, “Look, Momma! Got your brush!” I turn and see her holding the brush up for me to see, standing in her little pink t-shirt and a diaper. She is adorable, and the sight of her reaches into me, softens me in a way that only she can. I’ve been blind to her so much these years. Look at her, my daughter. How she’s growing so fast.

Jeannie keeps walking down the street, her steps a little wobbly.

“Tonight, okay?” I say to her.

She turns, that streak of blood on her cheek.

“Damn right,” she says.

RABBI RONNIE CAHANA, EVELYN SAYS:

My father insists that there are no dead-ends. Instead, he invites me into his space of co-healing, to give the very best of myself and for him to give the very best of himself to me. Paralysis was an opening for him. It was an opportunity to emerge, to rekindle life force, to sit still long enough with himself so as to fall in love with the full continuum of creation.

*

ARREST

Gerald goes for his walk the next morning, this time with Ed. Ed, I want to say, Ed?! After the gunshots? Really? I told Gerald about it yesterday, and about George W's death, but he just shrugged and left the house. So, I'm in no position to object to anything Gerald does now.

They meet at the end of Ed and Jeannie's driveway and then walk quickly away, not down the road like usual, but into the woods. Ed is carrying his gun. I think of running to the door and shouting at Gerald to stop, to come back, not to go anywhere with Ed and that gun, but I know he won't listen. If I say anything, he'll just walk faster. Last night, he came home late and asked what happened to the car. The *good* car. The *functioning* car. Where is the only thing we own that's worth anything?

"Gone," I said. I was rolled to face the window in bed. On my side. Watching the leaves on the trees, the shadows. Simon laid on the floor beside me. He raised his

head, and I rubbed his chin. I felt sick to my stomach. What would happen now? Now that I'd lost our good car?

“What do you mean gone?”

“Gone,” I said. “I fucked up. It's gone.”

He walked to my side of the bed, so he could look at me. He crossed his arms. He was wearing the old blue sweater that I love. It's soft, and smells like him, and if this were another time, I'd stand and lean into him.

“What are you talking about?”

“I didn't make the car payment because you paid for the gas. We're short this month.”

He stares down at me. “This month,” he said. “Just this month.”

I closed my eyes. I could tell him now. But still—still—I can't let Mary go.

“That's right,” I said.

I tried to build a wall around myself, something to deflect him, to make my stomach settle, to make these lies okay.

“What's happening here, June?” he said. “Something is very, very wrong.”

I kept my eyes closed. I felt tears slip out. I tried not to sniffle. Maybe it was too dark for him to see the tears. I remember George W, and the funeral I was supposed to hold with Jeannie.

“The coyotes got Jeannie's kitten,” I said.

“That's why you're upset?”

I shook my head. He leaned over, put one hand on my shoulder.

“June?”

And then my face wrenched up, into a real cry, and I heaved and sobbed. Not just for the bills but for slipping away from Gerald into Tony, for not knowing how to help Mary, for losing my job at the orchard and the tension between Danielle and I. I was failing them—my husband, my daughter, my friends—and becoming someone unrecognizable. This wasn’t me, all of this lying and secreting away. This wasn’t me.

He rubbed my back. “Can we talk about it?” he said. He was gentle again.

“Please? What’s been going on with you this summer?”

I opened my eyes. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m just sorry I messed up.”

“We’ll figure it out,” he said. This is my Gerald, the husband I love, and his kindness makes me feel even worse. I’ve betrayed him, I have, even if I didn’t sleep with Tony.

He rubbed my back until I fell asleep, and then he left with Ed to blow off some steam.

With a gun. Why Ed now, instead of Terence? Is Ed just more convenient, more available, right next door? Why is Gerald playing with guns? Is this because he’s so angry with me? I’ve pushed him to this?

The next morning, I’ve already gone for coffee with Simon and heard everyone talking at the Colonial Store: *That drunk, buying a rifle to kill the coyotes.*

All the older men are sitting at the counter, drinking coffee and laughing about Ed’s latest solution to Jeannie’s complaints. Why is Gerald joining Ed in this? He doesn’t believe in guns, and he’s against shooting the coyotes. Is this just his rebellion

against me? Against this town? He's fed up with being here, with this place and the restrictions I've put on our lives, so he's going hunting?

I pull the door closed behind me, bells jingling, and the place goes hushed. They glance up at me, nod, then glance back down at their cups. These are old New England men, tight-lipped, keep their talk spare. They've been here for generations. What are thinking about me? They won't gossip, or offer up conjecture.

(Did I imagine? *Were* they quieter?)

"Everyone *knows*," Danielle said the other day when I stopped by the orchard. "But I haven't done anything," I say. She turns, doesn't hear—or pretends not to. Those are the only words she'd say to me, hauling baskets of apples back and forth from the trucks to the barn. It's apple season now, August; fall is coming. She was sweating, an old button-down rolled up her arms and soaked to her waist. She wore her shorts and hiking boots. The CSA was doing well; even the new people liked it. But Danielle looked tired. I'd let her down. "Jasmine Walker was talking it over with Melanie Gross the other day at the apple-picking open-house. Just idle chit-chat, Junie. About *you*." The new women like to talk. All of our generation does, really, but my friends would have protected me. "They sure shut up when I walked up," she said.

Mrs. McCrae is here now, talking to Ava Lewis. They're old friends, my mother's generation.

"Hello, Junie, dear," she says, Irish r's curling.

I smile and wave. "I was going to call you, Mrs. McCrae. Could you take Amanda later today?"

Ava Lewis smiles at me. "Heard you've had quite a summer, June!"

There's something false in her voice, fake exuberance. Sarcasm? Is Ava being sarcastic? That's not like her. A man at the counter cleared his throat, and one of the other men (Mr. Allens, I think), started asking about the corn crop this year.

"So sorry, dear," says Mrs. McCrae, "but I just can't this week."

She smiles at me, looking sad, and turns away.

I feel my face hot and red. I go to the other side of the store, where a turning rack of cards stands between maple syrup jars and handmade quilts and pillow covers. I grab the first condolence card I see—cheesy, a drawing of a field of lavender—pay for it fast, without even looking at Myra Davies when she takes my money, and then I walk out. Who's watching me, humiliated now? Who's talking about me as I go? I dump my coffee in the trash outside, and speed-walk home.

Everyone knows, everyone knows, everyone knows, the rhythm haunting me, following every step. *Shit, shit shit shit shit shit*. The sky swirls above me, dizzy. I get into the car and start it and drive without thinking about driving. *They know, they know, they know, they THINK they know what I've been doing*. When I get to our street, I pull a pen from my bag, sign the card, and leave it at Jeannie's door. I don't knock to see if she's home. I'm sure she's at the orchard, anyway.

When I get home, I hear Gerald and Amanda in the backyard, playing bear (her new favorite game, to growl and hide and scare Gerald with another big growl). I race upstairs, crouch down on the cool bathroom floor, panting, slide onto my side, fetal position, hiding. Push closed the door with one shaking hand.

All afternoon, I hear shots from the woods and pray that Gerald's okay. Did they get one? Is Ed too drunk to shoot straight? I should call Danielle and let her

know, or get Michael Barrone out here. But I don't want to make it worse. So I sit and listen for the shots, and pray that nothing has happened to him, and apologize internally for all these mistakes I've made, to whom I do not know. I borrow faith in this life, this world, from Rabbi Cahana, who told me, through his wife, that "there are no dead-ends."

VII.

TOY SHOP INVESTIGATION CONTINUES

Bolton residents await the results of Michael Barrone's investigation of the Toy Shop vandalism. The only suspect thus far is Romero Francis. Nadine Schwartz, Professor of Cultural Studies at Blanchard College, and Gloria Stanwich of the United Farmworkers Union, have been in town to represent Mr. Francis. Barrone reports that the investigation will continue until the case is solved. He cannot estimate when that time will come. Romero Francis continues to work at McNally Orchards, with the understanding that he is not a flight risk. Danielle McNally said in a statement yesterday that she is "appalled at these charges and disappointed in her fellow citizens."

*

LITHE

All lithe and easy, she steps out from the plane, into the terminal.

"Stella!" I say, and stretch out my arms. There is always this great relief when I see her, as if we are spun back to some simpler, sweeter time. When we were small. All the fights over the phone, all the back and forth about New Mexico and Mary and Mom—it's gone for now, and there is just the relief of us back together. Gerald loves to see us together. Sits on the couch and watches me, says he never sees me laugh so much as when I'm with my sisters. Sister, now. As when I'm with Stella.

We hug, and I take her bag from her. She looks just the same. Has not changed in five years. The blonde bobbed curls, loose around her face, always a little wild. The long lean muscles, the tan skin, the round cheeks and blue eyes—this is Stella, as if she was born in New Mexico. Carefree and laughing.

“You look good, Junie,” she says. She puts her arm around my shoulder.

“Sure I do,” I say. I run my hand over my skirt, one of my new outfits from Mrs. McCrae’s shop last year; she gave me the things that didn’t sell. I never wore them, but now, I dig them out and wear them for Tony.

This morning, Gerald took the car—our only car—to Blanchard, dropping off Amanda with Mrs. McCrae because the carseat wouldn’t fit into the truck I borrowed from Ed. I haven’t told him I lost my job at the orchard. He won’t notice while Stella’s visiting. Maybe I can keep it a secret forever. Maybe we’ll win the lottery, and all our problems will be solved, and I can blank out this summer.

“I love the haircut. I haven’t seen you with short hair since you were ten.”

“Nine. Can we talk about Mary?” I say. “I know you just got here, but I just learned—”

“I know, I know, another study, and she’s talking again, you told me. Later, okay? I’m so tired from that flight.”

The people walk past us, dragging their bags and talking to each other and looking for their connections. There’s the smell of coffee in the air, floating from the Starbuck’s behind us.

“There’s been a lot happening around here,” I say. “I haven’t had a chance to tell you yet.”

“I’ve been working a lot.”

She sounds defensive. She works in New Mexico. She is always sewing, don’t I know? She’s working around the clock to sell her work and get it into the right shows, and it’s laborious, every stitch is done by her alone. She thinks that I think

she's a loafer on a commune. It's the beginning of an old argument, so I shrug and pull her bag further up my shoulder, change the subject: "So your flight was okay."

"Good."

She smiles and tucks her hand sewing—red fabric stretched in a wooden hoop—into her bag.

"Can you believe they let me bring these scissors on the plane?"

She holds up a pair of small, silver scissors with bird-shaped handles. She always has an embroidery hoop or scraps of fabric to hand-piece, or a big quilt rolled into a weekend bag, ready for binding, anything to keep her hands busy.

"Let's go to the Colonial Store for lunch. You want to?" she says. "Can we grab Amanda and go? I need one of their tuna melts."

Stella eats only organic, healthy—but those tuna melts at the Colonial Store are her *one* exception, she always says when she comes home.

"We can't all fit in the truck. I had to borrow Ed's car."

"Ed? The alcoholic neighbor Ed?"

"That one, yeah." I try not to look at her.

"I can sit in the back," she says. "Short ride, it'll be fun."

"You sure you want to go out? I could make you something at home."

I think of the staring faces, the gossip spinning threads between each person, around their cluster of friends, a tangle that leads to me.

She studies me for a minute. She wonders why I'm hesitating, but she pushes.

"I love that old place," she says. "My treat?"

“Sure.” I smile. Great plan. Fine. “Amanda will eat grilled cheese. She’s been obsessed lately.”

“And I want to get a Bolton Fair t-shirt for Merle while I’m here, too. We have to remember to do that.”

“No problem. I’ll give you the Great Bolton Tour.”

She looks up and shifts beside me. “It’s good to see you,” she says, and leans her head against my shoulder, little sister Stella home again.

I don’t say anything. I let myself slip back to our childhood, Stella dancing on the coffee table and my parents’ laughter; I sigh and lean my head on hers. I watch the baggage claim belt and wait for her luggage to come by.

*

RABBI RONNIE CAHANA

You have to believe you’re paralyzed to play the part of a quadrapalegic. I don’t. In my mind, and in my dreams every night, I Chagall-man float over the city, twirl and swirl, with my toes kissing the floor. I know nothing about the statement of man without motion. Everything has motion. The heart pumps. The body heaves. The mouth moves. We never stagnate. Life triumphs up and down.

*

COLONIAL STORE

I don’t want to go, but if I refuse, she’ll want to know why. So we go. We walk in, the three of us. When the door creaks open, everyone’s eyes turn to look at us, and land on

me. The music, classical strings, stops. *There she is*, they're thinking, *Junie the fornicator. Let's get her a red A for her chest, hunh? Stand her in the square and put her in the stocks for a week. Let her head hang before them all!* Fiery stakes around me.

"You okay?" says Stella. Amanda's tugging at my sleeve, pulling me toward the counter, and the music starts up again and everyone turns back to their food and conversations—the soccer moms at the lunch counter on stools, Katherine among them, the four old men drinking coffee at the corner table by the window, and the two women working the register. Were they staring at me, really? Do they know?

"Fine," I say. "C'mon, Panda, stop tugging. Take my hand."

"No, I hold Aunt Sell's hand," she says, and grabs for Stella.

"Barrone's questioning one of 'em," says one of the men in the corner as we walk past, towards the counter.

"That's what I hear," says the other. "But I think they're barking up the wrong tree."

"Nah," says the third. "Who else around here needs money as bad?"

As we get close, the soccer moms eye me, and Katherine murmurs to one of them, who snorts in laughter. They wear white cotton sundresses, pink sundresses, strapless sundresses, fitted tank tops with criss-cross fronts that celebrate their perky breasts and taper to their flat stomachs, and along their necks, long earrings. Jeans that hug their toned thighs and flare to their heeled shoes. And then, out of the back room, emerges none other than Nadine Schwartz, a stack of notebooks in her arms.

“Stell,” I say, “I’m not feeling great. Can we get lunch at home?”

“Nooooo,” shouts Amanda. “Grill cheese!”

Stella puts a hand on me, leans close. “What’s wrong? You’re pale.”

“My stomach,” I say.

The women sip their tea and coffee and glance up at me, eyeing each other, telling each

other some story about me that they think they know—*Junie’s off her rocker, pulled over to shout at Katherine, Junie’s sleeping with that vagabond Tony*. Nadine sees us and waves. A big smile.

“June!” she says.

“My stomach,” I say again to Stella, quietly. “I need to go home.”

Stella waves to Nadine and whispers, “Who’s that?” but there’s no time, she’s on us.

“June, hello!” says Nadine. She approaches us in her orange silk shirt and glowing skin. Confident. She reaches to shake my hand. I extend mine to her, shaky.

Stella touches her hand to my forehead. “You’re warm,” she says. “I brought some tea that will help.” Stella and my mother and their tea. She turns to Nadine. “I’m her sister, Stella,” she says, and pumps Nadine’s hand.

“I’m a coworker of Gerald’s,” says Nadine.

“Right. Great to see you,” I say. “But I’m not feeling well. We were on our way—”

Amanda screams again and throws herself on the floor. “Grill cheese,” she says in a whine, drool running down her chin.

“So sorry,” I say, and crouch down to talk to her.

“Of course,” says Nadine. “Feel better. Good to see you.”

Officious. Efficient. Intelligent. Nadine. I hate her.

“I’m sorry, Amanda, but we have to go.”

“Go away, Momma! I want Auntie Sell!”

Stella leans down and picks her up.

Junie Roe, terrible mother: add it to your list, I think to the soccer moms.

“Great haircut, Junie,” says Katherine as we walk away, her voice raised just loud enough that we can hear over Amanda.

I turn, but I can’t read her face. It’s a smile, maybe a smirk. She raises her mug to me, that unreadable look on her face. When I turn back, I hear them laugh again.

Outside, Stella carries Amanda to the car and puts her into her seat.

“That’s the one you’re jealous of, isn’t it?” she says.

She buckles the belts. Amanda’s just whimpering now, having made her scene. She leans her head to one side. She’ll eat lunch and then fall right to sleep when we get home.

“Yeah,” I say. “That’s Nadine. Gerald’s hero.”

“Not a chance,” says Stella. “Gerald’s always loved you. I’ve found it sickening, the way you two are together. That doesn’t go away.”

Back home, Ed’s truck in his driveway, Stella brings me tea in bed, and I take advantage of her kindness. Once she leaves the room again, I slide beneath the covers, my cell phone in my hands. I call Tony.

“Stella’s here,” I say.

He laughs. “Oh, I know. News travels fast.”

I flinch. Has he heard the rumor about us?

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to get away for awhile,” I say.

There’s a pause. “I understand,” he says. “We’re under fire. I’m sorry I’ve made things harder for you.”

“You haven’t.” But I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to say anything about what he said—*I love you*—I don’t have anything to say back. I’m thinking of Gerald again, and how Stella said we were always sickening. Her way of saying how we love each other.

So I say, “I saw Alan Ball. I wanted to tell you.”

“Are you okay?”

I’m quiet for a moment. Am I okay. I’m hiding underneath the covers. Danielle has replaced me with Jeannie. Gerald’s going to lose his place at Blanchard. Our house is about to be foreclosed on, and the good car’s been repossessed. And when all that happens, Mary’s going to have to move. She saw a dead man who had killed himself with an animal IV. Oh, and one more thing! The whole town thinks we’re sleeping together!

“I’d better go.”

We hang up, but I stay underneath the covers. When I close my eyes, I see the man Mary saw, sprawled on the floor, the IV in his arm, just like I used to see her car in that tree, her broken face, right after the accident, every time I closed my eyes. That dead student at the vet’s office, he’s wet himself, because that’s what happens just

before you die, Alan told me—why did he tell me that?—and I see it on his chinos, that last indignity. I open my eyes. Did she do it on purpose? Did she intend to hit that tree?

Breathe in and out.

Close my eyes again. See the man. Think of what Evelyn told me, how her father's paralysis brought him to life. He has learned to crawl and to walk and to speak. He has given sermons, dictated to his daughter and wife a single letter at a time, with blinks of his eyes. Evelyn called his paralysis an *opportunity*. The word made me cringe. She's so new-age. Does she really believe that?

But what if I did?

She said we have a choice in this, and can decide how we'll react to what happens to us. Another cliché. But, she's happy and I am not. So, I try. I can become better through this, I tell myself. I can learn. Didn't Magdalene Tetrault write that her work came back to her after her husband died? She was alone, raising her son, and afraid and mourning, and her husband visited her as a bird perched on her shoulder, and sang, and she wrote two books of poems and a memoir. And Stella with her quilts, sewing by hand through every hospital moment, every ugly high school time, every heartbreak, and her pregnancy and miscarriage in college. She was a sophomore. She didn't want the baby, but as she was deciding what to do, she miscarried, and then her decision was made—but she found that she'd wanted the baby, after all. I remember how she wept on the phone to me, when I was in Michigan and she was at the University of Arizona. She made five bed quilts that year. Does art come from suffering? Does it *have* to?

I hum to myself, *I'm a sky guy, you're a sky guy. The itsy bitsy spider climbed up the water spout.* Songs I sing to Amanda. Now, for myself. Until I fall asleep.

COYOTE

That night, I hear a clatter. I think it's Stella in the kitchen, on New Mexico time. Or Simon checking his bowl for more food.

Gerald sleeps. Hears nothing.

I climb out of bed and sit for a moment on the edge, staring at the tree in the window. Blustery shadow of leaves and branches on the wall. The moon is up. It is after midnight. I tread across the carpeted floor, to the door, to the hallway. Half asleep. Nightgown billowing around me.

I scan the room. The couch, a quilt-in-progress draped over its back now, raw edges exposed, safety pins in rows along the top. The chair, the fireplace, to the right—the kitchen, countertop gleaming, wood floors shining. Everything as we left it. I turn to my left, to the front door. Walk across the wood. The plastic hanging between the main room and the den blows a little in the breeze. Someday, someday, we'll hang that goddamned dry wall and finish that goddamned room.

I turn on the front stoop light, and again—another clatter. From the trash cans in the driveway.

I open the front door and walk outside. Stand there on the front step in my bare feet, the stones cool on my soles. I look into the darkness. The trash is all over the driveway, strewn everywhere—wrappers and paper towels and the recycling strewn, too—milk jugs and newspapers. Shit. Gerald never listens when I say we need to set it

out in the morning. Set it out at night and it will all get eaten. Now, look! I should go wake him up. There is a scurry in the trash, and something crawls out—a gray mass, a possum, long rat tail and pointed nose. It darts across the street, into the underbrush, then into the woods. I hear it run off through the leaves.

I stand there, thinking that I ought to get another trash bag and clean it all up. Drag the trash cans back into the little garage for the night. Save myself the trouble in the morning. I look down the street towards Jeannie’s house and see her trash spread everywhere, too. As soon as I’m gone, that possum will be back. And in the morning, Ed and Jeannie will blame the coyotes, use the trash-digging as more fuel to hunt them.

I look up. The moon is out. Shining. White. Blue light falling. Nearly daylight it is so bright.

The neighborhood is quiet. I can see one half of Jeannie’s house, moonlight shining on it, quiet. My favorite time.

I turn and walk back inside, back upstairs, back into bed.

Gerald rolls into me, “Where were you?”

“Outside,” I say. “Possum. You put the trash out.”

“Sorry,” he says.

He wraps his arm around my waist, presses his face into my shoulder.

“You smell good,” he says.

I showered before bed, and my hair is still damp.

He breathes in. Runs his hands down my leg, up underneath my nightgown, back up again. At first, I think: no. Just yesterday he was out walking with Ed and that

gun, leaving me to worry. But then his hands keep moving, and he kisses my neck, and pulls my nightgown up, his hands running up my thighs. I close my eyes. Breathe in. He slips his hands around my waist, against my stomach, and kisses the back of my neck, and suddenly, it's like I remember him. I remember who we used to be. I put my hand against the back of his neck. Into his hair. His thick dark hair. I feel his lips against me. Lean my head against his chest. He kisses my neck. My shoulders. The base of my neck. Between my shoulder blades. His hands against my stomach, my hips, my thighs. He slips off his boxers, pulls my nightgown over my head, and we don't say anything. My leg on top of his leg, my hand wrapped behind me, on his thigh, pulling him in. I don't turn to him. We stay this way, my back to him. And it's easy, this way, to rewind, to push myself back into this life with Gerald, to go back to all of our years together, as if I haven't strayed at all. There's a softness to him, a give. He's gentler. The years and years between us. The night is hushed, Amanda asleep. The coyote, raccoon, possum gone for now. I stare at the shadow of leaves on the wall.

Then there's that sound, the bang. "Do you hear that?" I say. "It's Ed with a gun."

"Yes," says Gerald. But he doesn't stop, he kisses my neck, and it's good. I watch the leaves again. The way they shake in the wind. The way they rest so still when the wind is gone. He holds my breasts and I hold his leg and push myself into his body, and he pushes into me.

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EIGHT AM

They drink coffee in the kitchen, sitting across from the table. Amanda is still sleeping. I walk downstairs in my robe, and they're laughing over something. Laughing hard. I have not seen Gerald laugh like this in so long. Tears down his face. I'm half asleep; I've never been good in the morning.

“What is it?” I say. “What's so funny?”

They can't stop. I wait for Gerald to turn to me, and fill me in, and give me a look that means he remembers, that it was good last night, that we're reconnected. It meant something.

“My stomach,” says Stella, “ow.”

Gerald puts his hand to his eyes, index finger on one, thumb on the other.

Catching the tears.

“Stella's boss Joseph, he got naked in front of his class one day—”

“In front of his class?” I say. “At the university?” She's been teaching an embroidery class there this summer.

Stella laughs harder, leans forward, elbows on her knees. “Oh, my god, stop,” she says.

“They were adults,” says Gerald, “not kids.”

Stella wails again at this.

“And?” I say.

I walk into the kitchen, pull down a mug. I laugh a little, trying to go along with them.

“Oh,” says Gerald, “he just walked around naked for an hour, and everyone sat there drawing the fruit in front of them. They thought he was drunk.”

“I should hope so,” I say.

“It was a *still life class*,” says Stella, and they both roar again.

“Uh huh,” I say. “Amanda’s still asleep. Keep it down a little, okay?”

I reach for the pot. What about last night? What about that touch, between us?

The sex we haven’t had for months. Will he touch me now? A kiss good morning?

Some recognition of it happening?

“There’s no more coffee,” I say.

I look at them. Still laughing. Gerald is trying to catch his breath, breathing in through his nose, out through his mouth. As if this is Lamaze. He looks over at me and then looks back at Stella.

“Sorry,” he says, “I guess we had the last of it.”

So then. Everything from last night is gone, no lingering sweetness, no lasting reconnection. I turn on the faucet and fill the pot.

“Sounds like it was funny,” I say.

I glance out the window. The dew is already gone. It will be hot today.

Danielle is putting up the tent for the Frauleich party tonight. What a day to get ready. She’ll curse and sweat through the whole thing.

I think of Tony, wonder what he’ll do today. If he’ll take Doris out for lunch, or drive up to Ogunquit with her like he’s been saying he will soon, her last chance at the Maine coast, her favorite. If he’ll take a swim in the pond. If we might see him somewhere.

“I think that pot’s full,” says Gerald.

I look down. It’s overflowing.

I laugh a little.

“And,” says Stella, still looking at Gerald, “the worst part was—” She waits for him.

He looks back at her. She is in her white cotton PJ’s, probably organic, definitely homemade, one knee pulled up to her chest. A thin-strapped tank top. Her shoulders are muscular from the yoga she’s always doing. Divots appear by her collar bone when she wraps her arms around her leg.

She says again, “*And* the worst part was, the dean was visiting that afternoon.”

Gerald stares at her a minute.

“Either of you want coffee?” I say. I hold out the pot, tilt it side to side to get their attention.

“No, thanks,” says Stella. Gerald does not look over. Does not answer.

“Oh, god,” he says, “so he saw it all.” He watches Stella’s face.

I scoop the coffee into the filter, pour in the water, and slide the pot underneath.

“The faucet’s dripping again, Ger,” I say. I turn to see if he’s heard me, and Stella nods and says “Yup. Full frontal to the dean.”

And they both start laughing again. About her life at the university. I want to tell them a funny story about what happens at the orchard. Funny things happen at the orchard! I could shout. But there they are. Both bent over, saying oh, oh, it hurts, and loving, loving how it feels.

ANOTHER INVESTIGATION

“I don’t want to talk to you,” says her voice on the phone. It’s Danielle. She usually calls the house phone, which we’ll answer every time. My cell, I often ignore. But this message is on my cell, not intended for Gerald to hear. She says, “I know what you’re doing to Gerald, and I don’t like it. I’m so angry.”

She stops herself. Pauses. Starts over.

“We need your help,” she says. “Nadine’s got a lawyer here, and he says that we need to find other suspects. He wants to talk to you, to ask if you saw anything. So. Call us back.”

A voice in the background, a man’s voice, and then the phone is muffled for a moment. When she comes back on, her voice is more conciliatory.

“It’s important. Please call us back, June. Not for me. For Romero. Okay? Thanks.”

REHAB

Stella and Amanda and I are supposed to pick up my mother to go see Mary, but I don’t know how we’ll get there today. Gerald’s already left, and I forgot to ask Jeannie for Ed’s keys again. I don’t want to tell Stella about the car. But—when I walk from the house into the driveway to take Simon to his favorite spot in the woods for a quick run, there’s an old blue Datsun, my mother’s car.

Is my mother here? I spin around, looking for her. No.

I walk around back to be sure it’s hers, and there’s the *Make Tea, Not War* bumper sticker on the back, a remnant from her shop days. Simon wags his tail beside me, then romps into the grass and takes a roll in something he likes the smell of. How

did her car get here? I go to the driver's side door, open it, and see inside: keys, dangling from the ignition, the insignia for her favorite quilt shop hanging down on a plaquard. And in the backseat, Amanda's seat buckled in, ready to go. Did Gerald do this?

I stand up straight again, hands on my hips. "Who did this, Simon?" I say. He flips onto his back and wiggles into the scent, his paws curled into his chest. I look around. No one's here. There's Jeannie's house with the curtains drawn, Ed likely asleep in the living room on the recliner. Jeannie's not at the orchard yet. Maybe she'll oversleep and get fired, I think, hopeful. The fog hangs in the woods behind our houses. It's quiet. I put my hands on my hips, settling into this good news. Okay, then. I'll be using my mother's car.

I go inside and call Danielle back. "Simon, come!" he follows me in, forgiving me—I realize when we're back inside—for forgetting about the woods.

"Hi," she says. "Let me put on Hank, the lawyer."

"Wait, Dan—I need to explain that—" I want to tell her about the meeting with Alan Ball, and why I slipped out that day with Tony, how upset I was, how much I needed an escape, and everything I've been trying to understand about Mary's life before the accident. I want to say, This is the reason I've been fucking up, Dan, c'mon, listen to me. I need you, my friend.

Upstairs, Amanda squeals and laughs. Stella's tickling her. "No more, no more!" she says, and then there's quiet.

Hank's on now, asking me questions:

“Did you see anyone suspicious on the orchard grounds in the last two weeks? Do you remember what happened on the day of July twelfth? How long have you worked at the orchard? Are any of the seasonal workers in any kind of trouble?”

No, no no no no no, three years, and no.

“Danielle says that you’ve had some financial trouble this summer, some bills you’re behind on. Can you tell us about that?”

I go silent. I stare at the wall, that bright yellow wall that I’ve always hated. Is he asking if *I’m* responsible for the vandalism? Could that be? And Danielle told him? Told him we’re behind on our bills?

“June?”

“Yes?” Is he waiting for an answer? Is Danielle blaming it on me?

“Are you having financial troubles this summer?”

“We’re behind on some bills, yes, like Danielle said.”

“How far behind?” He waits. So, I’ve been betrayed, and now I’m a suspect, too. Thanks, Danielle. I’d never have thought you’d do this to me. Replace me with Jeannie, sure, but tell the lawyer that I’m up a financial creek and may have broken into the Toy Shop? Has she lost all faith in me?

I hear Danielle’s voice in the background saying, “Give it to me. Yes, now.” And then, in the receiver, she says to me: “I didn’t tell him to do this—I didn’t think, not even for a second, that you’re a suspect. Hank, you didn’t tell me you would do this.”

“You told him we’re having financial troubles?” I say. “What did you *think* would happen?”

“He asked about you, and if you were having any trouble. It just spilled out. Honestly.”

I shake my head. Amanda and Stella are talking upstairs, Amanda’s voice getting louder and louder as she tells Stella about something, maybe how she can say all of her abc’s now.

I’m angry. I don’t want to be angry, but I am. I feel betrayed. She doesn’t know everything—thank god I didn’t tell her everything—but she knows we’re struggling, of course, and she knows we’re behind on our bills at the rehab center. So, if she told Hank about this, what else would she tell? Has she told Terence everything—her suspicions about Tony—and will she tell Gerald, too? I close myself up.

“Sure,” I say. “Any more questions from Hank?”

“You’re mad. I can hear it in your voice. I’m sorry. Look, we’ve both messed up, right?”

I’ve never betrayed you, I want to say. Even when I don’t know if you’ll make it at the orchard, when you take on more than you can manage, when you hire more workers without asking the old crew if they want fewer hours, when you holler at the town meetings about the CSA and the need to convert all our farms to organic and the coyotes and the preservation land. All of these causes, and I support every one beside you.

“Gotta go,” I say, and hang up.

Stella and I get into the car, slam the doors, fasten the seatbelts. I turn and put my hand on the back of Stella's seat.

"Ow," says Stella. She grabs my hand and lifts it. "You're on my hair."

The car stalls and dies when I get to the mailbox. My mother hasn't driven in weeks. This car's out of practice. We should drive it more, anyway.

I move my hand to the gear shift. "Goddamned car."

I shift into neutral, press the clutch down and turn the key again. The engine patters. I rev it.

"What's the matter?" says Stella. "You've been a grouch all morning."

"Have not," I say. "I made you eggs. Eggs from the orchard, so they were happy-chicken eggs, free-range and organic, just the way you like them."

"Damn tar," says Amanda in the back. She kicks her legs against the seat.

I look at Stella.

"What did she say?" I say. I hold my breath and glance in the rearview mirror.

I see her face, smiling.

"Little bird? What did you just say?"

"DAMN TAR!" she says. She puts her whole body into it, squinching up her face and roaring. Stella smiles at me. I can tell she's trying to hold it in. The first time she's really smiled at me since she got here. It's in her eyes, the laughter. I almost want Amanda to say it again so that we can roar together. I turn around and look at Amanda.

"Juice?" she says.

"Okay," I say.

Stella chuckles, leans down and gets a juice box from the bag at her feet.

“Here,” she says. She grabs Amanda’s foot and shrieks, and Amanda shrieks with her.

“Don’t encourage her,” I say. Why do I put a damper on things? I want to have fun with them. I do. I don’t mean to stop them, but it comes out before I can correct myself.

“Just having some fun,” says Stella. “Lighten up. Anyway, she doesn’t know what she just said.”

Lighten up. Lighten up. Words that slip under my skin and blister.

We go, rolling backwards past the mailbox, into the road, and then I push the car into first. There’s Jeannie, picking up all her trash in the road. She waves with a frown. She’s wearing a black sundress, her color since George W’s death.

“Damn coyotes,” she hollers. *Kie-yoats.*

“What’d she say?” says Stella. She leans forward to turn the air conditioner dial.

“It doesn’t work,” I say.

She rolls down her window, waves to Jeannie, and I shout across Stella, “It was a possum, Jeannie! I saw it last night!”

She puts her hand to her ear and shakes her head. Forget it. We round the curve and pull onto Coventry Road.

“She’s complaining about the coyotes. She thinks they’re eating her trash, but it was a possum. Her kitten was killed the other night, but I don’t think it was a coyote. Coyotes would’ve eaten the whole thing. Could’ve been a fishercat.”

“I didn’t think it would be so hot here,” says Stella. She leans her elbow on the window, rests her head against the side of her arm.

“Well,” I say, “it’s July. You lived here for nearly twenty years. Don’t you remember?”

“Yeah,” she says, “I remember.”

“The coyotes are a big deal this summer. Everyone in town is fighting about them. You should’ve seen the town meeting in June.”

She leans her head on her arm, so her head’s halfway out the window, the wind blowing into her blonde curls. Is she listening?

“Where’s your other car?” she says.

We cross the highway and I turn left, onto Miller Road.

“Told you,” I say, “in the shop.”

“Gerald said something about it being gone?” she says, and she pulls her head in and sits up straight again.

Is *she* investigating now? I go on the offensive. She hasn’t been here all year. What does she know? I roll my eyes.

“Right,” I say. “At the *shop*.”

We drive past Sundae School, the big Grecian building in the woods. Makes no sense here. Pillars painted white. But it smells of chocolate and ice cream inside, make-your-own sundaes. Stella goes whenever she’s home. She can eat anything and stay thin; she says it’s the yoga, but she was born this way. Since Amanda, I have to be careful. I still have the belly, almost all the baby weight. I regained everything I lost when I was breast-feeding.

I turn up Rattlesnake Hill, our street—my mother’s street. Past the Singh’s old blue house, past Danielle’s childhood house, and all the way up the hill.

“How has she been?” says Stella.

“Fine,” I say. “You know, okay. She wants us to clean out Dad’s closet while you’re here.”

I turn to check Amanda. She holds her juice box in one hand, the white teddy in her other. She leans her head back and lets the wind blow in her face. Her wispy brown hair blows around her.

“Okay. You’ve seen her a lot lately?”

“What do you mean? Of course I have.”

The trees on either side of the driveway are full and dark, leaves wet with the humidity.

“Well I’ve just heard you’ve been busy.”

She sits up straight and presses her palms together like she’s praying. Her cheeks still have the roundness they had when she was small, the cheeks of a girl, not a woman.

“From who?” I say, “Gerald?”

“Yeah, last night, he said you’ve been helping Danielle out a lot lately.”

“I have,” I say, “that’s absolutely right.”

“Doggie!” says Amanda, and points to Mrs. Lynn walking her dog.

“That’s right, doggie. What’s the doggie say?”

Stella says, “So that’s why I asked if you’d seen Mom a lot.”

“Woof, woof,” says Amanda.

“I thought you said Danielle didn’t need as much help this summer,” she says.

“Well, not *this week*. Usually she does, but she knew you were coming, so she changed things around for us. So I could visit with you.” My lies are getting more and more elaborate. I should just tell Stella. But—then I’ll have to tell Gerald, since they’re sharing secrets these days.

I stare straight ahead. Drive past Mrs. Merrell on her daily walk. She has the same haircut she’s had for the last thirty years. Has lived in this town her whole life. Would not know who she was in any other place – all of her stories, her life, her childrens’ lives, are here.

Stella raises her hands to her chest. Closes her eyes. Rounds her lips and says a long, “Ooooooh.”

I turn into the long driveway and we go further uphill, through the woods, past the orange daylilies that bloom along the edge, all on their own (or did someone plant them? My mother?). I stop the car at the top of the driveway. The rock garden to the right is full of weeds. They must have been left for two weeks at least, and I didn’t notice until now. Mom hasn’t been gardening, a bad sign. What else have I let slip past?

“We’re here.”

Stella keeps her eyes closed.

“What on earth are you doing, Stella?”

She ignores me.

“I’m going in,” I say. I yank the emergency brake up. The car shakes a little.

“You’ll stay with Amanda?”

“Yes,” she says, keeping her eyes closed.

“Stay here, Little Bird, I’ll be right back,” I say, and touch her knee. “Okay?”

“I come,” she says. Her chin is shiny with drool. She holds her white teddy, Stella’s long-ago gift, in one hand, his hand in her mouth. Her hair sticks to the sides of her face where she’s sweating. She kicks the seat with her heels, toes hitting the back of Stella’s seat. Stella doesn’t seem to notice.

“Not now, I’ll be back in a minute.”

“I come,” she says, and she beats her legs against the carseat, throws the juicebox down.

“It’ll just be a minute. I’ll be right back. I promise.”

I open the door, step out, and slam it behind me. Stella is still sitting there, just breathing now, eyes closed. I don’t wait to hear if she’ll say *namastay*. Amanda screams, “Me! Me! I come!” Wailing. I want to pick her up, but it will take twice as long. I walk up the stairs.

The house is set into a hill, yard that slopes into the trees in front and is buttressed up against more woods in back. Acres and acres of woods around, my mother still owns sixty acres of land that Danielle’s gotten her to sign into the trust.

I walk up the stone steps to the front door, pausing at the glass to look myself over. Whenever Stella’s home, I do this: reassessing. The hips wider, the rear flatter, the belly rounder. But the shoulders still wide and graceful and strong, swimmer’s shoulders, the legs muscled, my hair short now, and sassy, I think. That’s what Tony says—it’s sassy. Sexy, too. He uses those words. “Not bad,” I say to my reflection. Stella’s already told me I should get new jeans, flared-leg, she says. “Why are you still

wearing tapered jeans?” I look at the jeans. Maybe she’s right, but where would that money come from? I want to ask her. Do *you* want to buy me new jeans? With your couture quilting money? Your blooming business?

I turn the knob and walk inside. My mother is in the kitchen putting cookies onto a plate. The house smells of them, chocolate chip. I walk in while she stacks them.

“Stella?” she says before she turns.

She sees me. She lowers her head just a touch, something anyone else might miss.

“Oh, June,” she says. “Hi, dear.”

She’s wearing the red skirt with the elastic waist, stretches with her, she likes to say. And the chamois shirt we got for her last Christmas. Cream-colored.

“Aren’t you hot, Mom?”

“You know me,” she says, “cool-blooded. Like Mary.” She shrugs and smiles, her cheeks flushed with the baking. She’s happier, and doing far more, than she has been all summer.

I walk into the kitchen and pull the saran wrap out of the drawer near the sliding door. As I pass her, I smell mint, the lotion she rubs on her knees in the morning.

“Mom, who brought your car over to our house? Did Gerald do that?”

“To your house? Nooooo,” she says. She turns and looks at me, confused.

“Tony came by and asked if he could borrow my car to help Doris move some boxes to storage.”

“Tony?” I stop pulling out the plastic. Frozen.

“Yes. So, now, you have my car?”

I smile. Then I laugh. I yank out the rest of the plastic with a flourish. “I have your car!” I say, and I keep laughing.

She comes to stand beside me, her hands on the counter. Her knuckles are big with arthritis from years of quilt-making and running the tea shop.

“Are you okay, June?”

I look at her, and she’s peering forward at me, inquiring, concerned.

“Unbelievable,” I say. “How did he hear?”

She leans closer. “Hear what, sweetheart?”

I stop myself, and turn to face her. “About the shop,” I say. “That our car was in the shop.”

All in one motion, I press the plastic over the cookies, put the wrap away, push the drawer shut with my hip, pick up the plate. “Ready?”

I look down at the cookies. The steam rises up into the plastic, fogging it.

She looks at me for another moment, narrows her eyes a little, her lips thinning. She stares at me. Has she heard? Does she think I’m having an affair with Tony, too? Maybe she’d be glad, anyway, that I was finally with him and not Gerald, like Dad hoped all those years ago.

“I got something for Stella,” she says. “Hold on.”

She raises one finger like she did when we were small: *girls, wait*. She comes back downstairs with a small red velvet box.

“What is it?” I say.

“Oh, a little birthday something,” she says.

A birthday gift? Jewelry? I’m here all the time, but Stella swoops in for a few days and gets gifts?

“Mine was three months ago,” I say, meaning it as a joke though it comes out too sharp.

“I never *see* Stella, Junie,” she says. “Honestly, you girls. It never changes.” She rolls her eyes.

“I was just kidding.”

She puts her hand against my back and pushes me to the door. “Let’s go,” she says.

We walk out to the car, where Stella stands waiting with her hands in the air and a big smile on her face. “Mom!” she shouts when we get to the top of the garden stairs, and our mother laughs with delight. Whenever Stella’s home, no matter what my mother’s mood, she laughs. She lightens. “My baby girl,” she says, “home again.”

At the hospital, Amelia comes in and gives Stella a hug. They catch up for awhile. Amelia was in Stella’s class in school, so they have to mention their friends and find out the latest—who’s just had a baby, who’s gone broke or gotten hooked on gambling, who’s getting divorced already, who’s moved to another state, who married rich and left Bolton. She doesn’t say anything to me about gossip she’s heard, so maybe she doesn’t know about me and Tony, either. This hospital is its own small world.

Mary lies in bed today. Amelia didn't know Stella was coming. I forgot to call ahead and ask her to be sure Mary was dressed and sitting up in her chair. But it's nine o'clock and she's still in her pajamas.

"I was just going to dress Mary," says Amelia. "If you want to wait for a few minutes, I can do that now."

"Kiss Mary," says Amanda.

"Great," says Stella. She smiles big. Her lips are always pink, a rosiness to those round cheeks. Our mother says it's because she eats organic, like she was raised to do. The implication is that I do not. I eat organic from Danielle's, but during the winter, we eat what's cheapest, and that's non-organic.

I walk Amanda to Mary's bed and lean down with her on my hip. She leans down and kisses Mary's cheek. Mary stares up at the ceiling. This is the only way that Amanda knows her, except for the stories I tell. How we were when we were small. Who her Aunt Mary used to be.

"Has she talked today, Amelia?"

She shakes her head. "Not today. Not for the last few days. Dr. Smalls had the speech pathologist and the therapist come, but they said they couldn't do much if she's not engaging anymore. She's—" she looks at me, with sympathy, "further away again."

My stomach drops. "She's not talking?" I turn to Stella and my mother. "She'd been saying words for a couple of weeks." I carry Amanda to the table by her bedside and hold up the notebook. I flip it open to the words she said. "See? She said all these words."

“Four,” says Amelia, looking at my mother and Stella.

“More than she’s said in months, though,” I say to Amelia. “It was a big change.”

Amelia looks back at me. “I know, June. This is so hard, how she comes closer and then gets further away again. I know. And now you’re facing this decision.”

“What decision?” says Stella.

“It’s nothing,” my mother says. “It’s nothing we need to worry about. Dr. Smalls will handle it. Nothing’s going to change. Don’t worry about it.”

Amelia adjusts Mary’s blankets over her feet.

“Why don’t you wait outside while I change her?” she says to us.

The three of us sit in the hall and wait, the plate of cookies on my mother’s lap. We sit in a row on the plastic seats. Stella leans back and says, “They need better lighting in here. Fluorescent lights are terrible.”

“It isn’t so bad,” says my mother. “It could be worse.”

“Like Worcester.”

“God,” says my mother, “yes.”

Stella wasn’t here then. She didn’t come home during Mary’s two-month Worcester stay at that awful hospital where Mary got bedsores and back-tracked, away from words and eating on her own, back onto the feeding tube. Stella missed the worst of it.

“What’s Amelia talking about, the decision?”

My mother purses her lips. “There isn’t a decision to make. I’ll talk to Dr. Smalls. It’s nothing.”

I say, “He talked to me earlier this—”

“Junie, it’s *nothing*,” says my mother and gives me an angry stare, her hand on mine, pressing hard. “If your father were here, he’d have quashed that as soon as it came up. I *told* you Dr. Smalls is easy to put off. I don’t know why this is still an issue.”

I don’t say anything. My mother thinks this is my failing, my fault that this has come up. And I haven’t done a good job caring for my sister. Though Stella lives across the country and does nothing, it’s my failing that Dr. Smalls wants Mary to move. I fume, but stay quiet. There’s no point in arguing. My mother’s too angry to hear anything. Her denial is too deep.

Evelyn walks by with her mother, on their way to the vending machines. She smiles at me, touches my hand, keeps on walking. They move slowly, their steps in pace with one another. Their family carries a sense of peace that ours lacks. I wish my mother would walk beside me that way.

We go back inside, and there she is in a yellow cableknit sweater and a pair of jeans. Her hair brushed back into a clip.

“Hi, sweetheart,” says Mom to Mary.

Stella leans down and kisses Mary again, a quick peck, and then she stands back up, as if it pains her to touch her.

“You look beautiful,” she says, but her eyes follow Mary’s scars, which zig-zag across her face, and when Stella turns away, her eyes are watering.

My mother puts the cookies on the table next to the bed, where the pot of ivy sits.

She says, “Mary, we’re celebrating Stella’s birthday today. I brought some cookies and a present, and some party hats.”

She takes five hats out of her purse and hands one to each of us. Stella laughs. She looks at the hat. It has a picture of a puppy on the front, a brown and white puppy with a pink lolling tongue.

“Mom,” she says, “seriously?”

“Oh, put it on, Stella,” says my mother. She laughs.

“June,” she says, “you, too,” and hands one to me. Then she puts one on her head and pulls the elastic underneath her chin, and leans over to put one on Mary, too.

“Sorry, Mary,” I say. “I guess it’s a necessity. We’re all in it with you.”

“Puppies?” says Stella. “How’d you pick the puppies?”

“Me!” says Amanda, and I lean down and put one on her head. She looks up at us and laughs, presses her teddy bear to her knees.

“We got hats,” she says. My mother laughs with her.

“Oh I found these in the basement,” she says. “A few weeks back. They must have been from one of your parties when you were small. I found a whole box of favors, too. I didn’t bring the noisemakers. They were a little moldy.”

“You’re cleaning out the basement?” I say.

Stella perches on the back of the red poppy chair and slides off her shoes. She keeps on looking at Mary. Watching her, the way Mary tracks us. At least there’s that, if she isn’t talking—she’s watching us. The doctors say it isn’t necessarily *watching*, but that’s what it looks like. And do they know, really, one way or the other? No.

Stella is uneasy around Mary, as if she's always on the verge of turning away, of walking out the door.

"Sure," she says, "Yes. I started last month."

"How come?"

"Oh, you know."

Stella looks at me, then Mary, then out the big window.

"Okay," I say. "Sorry I didn't bring your present, Stell. I'll give it to you back at the house."

"Don't worry about it," she says, still looking out the window.

"Here," says my mother. She hands her the little red box. "Open this."

"Oh," says Stella, "*jewelry*." She sits on the edge of the red poppy chair.

My mother laughs.

"Mine," says Amanda, and walks over to take the red box.

"You want to help me? Here, you pull up."

Stella holds the bottom of the box and Amanda climbs into the chair and pulls up the top. Stella holds the box in her hands and looks down. She looks at our mother, then looks into the box again and shakes her head.

"Oh," she says. She shakes her head again. "No, you can't give this to me."

"Why not? Of course I can."

Amanda reaches for it.

"No, sweetie," says Stella.

"That's mine."

"In a minute, okay?"

“What is it?” I say. I walk over and look over Stella’s shoulder. She looks back at me and smiles, one finger touching the diamond.

“Can you believe it? Look how beautiful.”

“Grandma’s ring?” I turn and look at my mother.

“She said Merle was going to propose, and she has no money for a ring. And I thought, this is just sitting in the jewelry box. What a waste! Your grandmother would want one of you to have it.”

“Yeah,” I say.

I got engaged the year our grandmother died. She died the summer before Mary’s accident, and I was engaged the winter before. Gerald gave me a ring we picked out together at a flea market, from the estate jewelry. A pear-shaped ruby, set in white-gold. I love it. Would not trade it for anything. But—

“You didn’t tell me she was about to propose.”

Stella looks up at me, cupping the ring box in both hands, as if it is a bird that chose to perch on her but might fly away.

“I did, too!” she says.

“No. No, you didn’t.”

Why didn’t she confide in me? She’s about to get married, and I didn’t know?

“Junie,” says my mother. “You *knew* they’d get engaged soon. And they’ve actually set a date. More than I can say for you and Gerald.”

“You know why we haven’t gotten married.” I gesture to Mary and turn to Stella. “When did you talk to Mom about it?”

“Don’t get like that, Junie,” says Stella. “Come on.”

“I’m not being like anything. I just think it’s weird you didn’t tell me. I talked to you last week.”

“Well, it wasn’t—” she looks back down at the box, blushing “—you know, not a big deal,” she says. “It’s been coming for a long time. You knew that. And, actually—”

She looks up again.

“Actually, she proposed last week.”

I stand up straight, stare at her.

“When?”

“Oh, *Stella*,” says my mother. “Sweetheart!” And she runs to her and puts both palms against her face. She kisses her and hugs her, and when she leans back, I see that there are tears welling up and running down her cheeks. This is what my mother wants, a wedding, a celebration to distract us from all of this. For her, the wedding is the dream. For me, I don’t think the wedding is a dream anymore. Married, or not, Gerald and I are in this together, aren’t we? And wasn’t Mary right? Do I need a wedding? Isn’t it just a patriarchal tradition? Those were her words, when I was planning mine. What would she say about Stella’s?

Our mother has always been more affectionate with Stella. It’s easier with her, because of how Stella is—the way she hugs and laughs and tries to joke her way out of everything. Even when we were young, even then, this is how it was. My mother thinks I’m harder to love.

“I was going to tell you when we were alone,” she says to me. “But now seemed like the time.”

“Yeah.” I smile. It’s forced, but I smile. I hug her and say, “Congratulations,” and try to keep smiling big. “I’m going for a glass of water. Be right back.”

“We have cups and a pitcher right here,” says our mother.

I don’t turn around. I head for the bathroom. I head for the big orange door, and push it open, and lean against one of the stall doors, and wonder why Stella has told me none of this. Why I am not part of her life anymore. Why it is our mother to whom she turns now. And has she thought about Mary in this? I canceled the wedding because of Mary, at least at first, and now Stella’s going to have a wedding? It doesn’t even seem like her style, with her quilt-making, commune-loving life. To have a traditional wedding?

“Mary,” I say, wishing I could talk to her. I try to imagine her here. “Come back,” I say,

“just for a few minutes, come back.” I say it like a child’s birthday wish, eyes closed, and when I look up, she is sitting on the radiator, by the window, packing her cigarettes against her palm.

I laugh. “Mary,” I say. “I thought you quit.”

“Eh,” she says. She pulls off the plastic and takes a cigarette out.

“Can’t smoke here.”

She throws her head back and laughs. Loud, loud Mary laugh. Her cheeks go red.

“Good one, Junie. Here, have one.”

She holds the pack out to me, but I shake my head.

“Come on, you’re not such a goody-two-shoes anymore,” she says, and gives me an exaggerated wink.

I lean against the door. I listen to the sound of her lighter, the click, the sizzle of the flame touching paper and tobacco, the soft closing of the lighter.

“I haven’t done anything with Tony,” I say.

Mary shrugs. “Technicalities.” She puts the cigarette to her mouth.

“What should I say to Stella?”

She sucks in, breathes out, and the smoke is in the air now, between us.

“Tell her you’re happy for her. You know what to say. You don’t need me for this.”

“Yes, I do. I do need you. I should have told you back then, I should have told you that, and then maybe you wouldn’t have done all those things to yourself.”

She rolls her eyes and smiles at me, looks right into my eyes. Runs her free hand through her long black hair and says, “Junie.” And she smiles and shakes her head, then leans in so close I can smell her tobacco breath. “Listen to me. It’s time to face the fear. Remember? I taught you this.” Her voice gets serious, low. “Put your head in the water, and *swim*.”

LOGARITHM: COMPLETE HISTORY

There is a gap. If I can find the gap, I can find the cure. If I can find the cure, all of this will be solved. I retrace, and retrace, and retrace, looking for some magic algorithm, some answer to all of this. Where did I leave Mary behind? Where did she change? Where did we lose track of her? Where did I lose track of myself? If we get the

complete history, if we know everything about who she was and what happened, if we trace her life back and back, if I remember it all, then I'll know what happened. I can diagnose her like she diagnosed her animals. I can solve this. Stella says I don't live anymore. And she is right, she is right, everyone is right—my mother and Gerald and Stella. They know. I don't live. So I found a way into living. I found Tony, and he is leading me back to it. And Danielle says, That's not what anyone meant. And she hollers and is angry, her face red, her hair all frizzy because it's August and too humid. The leaves drip water. I stand underneath them at dawn, and wait for the dew to fall on me when the branches tremble in the breeze. This isn't what we meant, they say, shouting at me. I know, I say, I know I know. But I'm so happy now. I'm feeling again, my body waking up, after so much numb, I'm all prickly and alive, so much it hurts. You know? That feeling? Of the pins and needles? I spin under the trees and let the dew hit me.

*

WHAT IS THE COURSE OF TREATMENT FOR THOSE WITH MODERATE/SEVERE TBI (TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY)?

When the individual with TBI has been medically stabilized but is not yet alert (still at Rancho Level I-III), he/she is transferred to a coma recovery program, which may be closely linked with or a part of an inpatient rehabilitation facility. These programs are designed to meet the special needs of persons in coma. It is expected that approximately half of these patients reawaken to the point where they can then benefit from inpatient rehabilitation; the other half, who remain in coma or who cannot benefit from at least three hours of inpatient therapy, are transferred to extended care programs.

Extended care programs offer special services for injured individuals who need supportive care and therapies less intensive than offered in inpatient rehabilitation programs. These individuals have very diverse needs, but typically need both therapy and nursing services to optimize their level of functioning and comfort. These services are typically offered in nursing homes.

*

TETRAULT

Magdalene Tetrault wrote about the northern lights, the way the sky lit up at night. How many people have read these words? Her thin memoir published by the university press of Quebec. One hundred volumes. I found it in my grandmother's things. A past she denied. I uncovered it after she died. And it would be my dissertation, this writer. With her memoir and two books of poems, one of which I have yet to find.

Magdalene Tetrault went to the coast with her uncles, a fishing trip, and this is where they saw the lights, and the water that lit up when it moved. Algae, said her uncles. Magdalene called it magic. She wrote about how the sky swirled, how it moved as if it was alive. *Comme regardant la mer dans le ciel, et les étoiles dans la mer*, she said. Like looking at the sea in the sky, and the stars in the sea. Phosphorescents in the water. Touch the water with your toe and you are dazzled.

RING

I come back into the room, and they are just where I left them. My mother is saying something about the church, and Stella says, "No, no, not a church. That's not us. We'll have it outside. On the mesa."

Amanda keeps reaching for the ring, and finally, Stella puts it on her finger and lets her slide it off and put it into her pocket. Everything goes in her pockets now. She

pulls her hand out and then pulls the pocket out to look inside and see the ring. Then she takes it back and puts it on another finger.

“Keep an eye on her, Stella,” I say.

“I am.”

My mother asks Stella when she and Merle will get married, and what sort of wedding would she like. And Stella, who said she might never get married and would live forever with Merle on the commune, she goes on and on about a dress, and the wedding on the cliffs that drop to the sea, and her friends in New Mexico who will be there.

“I’m not going to have bridesmaids,” she says. “Sorry, Junie.”

I laugh. “That’s a relief.”

But it isn’t, really. She lives a life I do not know, have never seen, am not a part of. She is marrying a woman I’ve never met. She bubbles over with wedding talk. She has lived on a commune, and now, in an old house in New Mexico that looks out over red dirt—I imagine—and sage brush and cacti. She’s living with a woman named Merle who plays classical guitar, who always says hello when I call. Even though I’ve never met her. I always say hello back, but why? We don’t know each other. We only have versions of one another that Stella’s given to us.

Worst of all, she is me three years ago. Me imagining a wedding and a future with Gerald—a perfect, pink-sunsets-everyday future—and all of that came before Mary’s accident. Led to Mary’s accident. To her coming to Bolton, crashing, this limbo she lives in now. That’s my fault. Gerald and I still aren’t married. He resents that. I can’t marry him without Mary here. And I envy Stella her joy, her wedding

ebullience. I envy the simplicity of her happiness, which—somehow—is uncomplicated by all of this. How does she escape this guilt and pain? And have I changed so much, now that I don't even want a wedding? I agree with Mary. I delayed it so long, and now I don't care about that stuff. How does Stella get to live free and far away, heralded by my mother upon every infrequent return?

I stand there awhile and let my mother and Stella laugh and chatter, and then I sit beside Mary, in the chair on the other side of the bed. I let myself drift away, into the trees outside, where the wind is blowing, where Tony is holding my hand in the sunshine, on the sand, and he so gently kisses my cheek.

BACK HOME

I haven't slept this late in years. I sit up, confused. Gerald's side is empty, pillow still holding the shape of his head, covers pushed back. The red tulips folded over one another. The tree blows in the wind, and it is still cool with the windows open. Not yet sweltering, as it will be by noon.

Amanda comes up the stairs and says, "Momma," and runs to the bed. She comes and stands by my side. I roll over and look at her.

"Hi, Manda," I say. "How you doing?"

She smiles. She holds a new doll in one hand.

"I gotta baby," she says.

She holds the doll for me to see. It's a little girl doll with two brown ponytails, her body made of cloth, and dressed in a striped skirt and a little woolen rainbow striped sweater.

“She’s pretty. What’s her name?”

“Tree,” she says.

I laugh. “Tree?”

She nods.

“Where’d you get Tree?”

“Aunt Sell.” She holds the doll out and touches its lips with one hand, running her finger along the red embroidered smile.

I sit up on the pillows. Stella comes in, still half asleep, and crawls over to Gerald’s side of the bed.

“Did you dress yourself today, Manda?” I say.

“Yeah,” she says.

She’s wearing an old running t-shirt of Gerald’s and a blue skirt with a little green clip belt around her waist, cinching up the t-shirt. The shirt blooms, stained with yellow splotches, over the top of the belt.

Amanda runs out of the room, then comes running back with Tree and a puzzle in her arms. She thrusts both onto the bed with a little *oof*, and then goes back for the pieces she dropped.

“Thanks for the doll,” I say to Stella. “She’s so cute. Did you make her?”

Stella says, “Mm,” underneath the quilt. “This one’s holding up well.” She fingers the edge of the tulip quilt.

“I love this quilt. Did you say thank you, Amanda?”

“Mm-hm,” she says. She picks up the pieces on the carpet and then comes back to the bed and climbs up.

“Can you say it again, please?”

“Thank you,” she says.

“You’re welcome, Panda,” says Stella. “I made it special for you.”

Stella’s here for two more days, and that’s it for the year. I try to suppress my anger at her for telling secrets with Gerald, trying to lure us to New Mexico, and for not telling me about her engagement. Did she think I would be jealous? Is that why she didn’t say anything?

“So,” I say, “you’re selling a lot of work right now?”

“Six thousand dollars worth last month,” she says. “It’s been amazing.”

“Six thousand dollars in one month?” Is she kidding? Does she know that six thousand dollars could save us? No. Of course she doesn’t know. I’ve told her none of this.

“It was a big month. The last few months, I’ve averaged four quilts a month, about three thousand dollars.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, but you know, that’s working around the clock. I’ll have to slow down soon. Or hire an assistant, maybe. Merle says I should hire someone. I keep saying this is just a temporary boom in business, but Merle thinks it’s real growth.”

I don’t know what to say. I’m choking on that amount of money. I thought that they were barely scraping by? They’re both artists. Merle’s a weaver. And they’re raking in these thousands?

“Sure,” I say. “To do the dyeing?”

“I have to do the dyeing.”

“Oh, then the sewing?” I try to remember the different steps to make a quilt—
piece the top, make the sandwich, pin it together, quilt it.

“The piecing?” I say.

“No, I need to do that, too.”

I laugh.

“That’s the problem. I don’t know what to let someone else do. I feel like I
have to do it all or they’ll see someone else’s hand in it, and it won’t be the same.”

She sounds like me. Should I tell her she sounds like me?

“Sounds familiar,” I say. “Aren’t you always telling me to let go, let someone
else take over for awhile?”

She laughs. “I guess so.”

It’s easy to talk like this, and I try to keep us going.

“Would you teach full-time, do you think?”

She makes a little *uch* sound. “No,” she says. “All that bureaucracy, and the
planning and grading? No, that’s too banal. I like it just now and then, but not all the
time. I wouldn’t have any time to do my own work.”

And there we go, plummeting into our sisterhood. I pick up my coffee again.
Take a sip.

“Thanks,” I say.

She slouches further into the covers. Amanda reaches over and takes her hand.

“Dollhouse, Nella?” says Amanda, and takes Stella’s hand, pulling her to her
room.

“It’s not a judgment of you,” she says.

“Nella,” says Amanda.

“Okay,” I say. “Sure it wasn’t.”

“I just don’t want to teach full-time. We’re both picking up business, we have shows coming up. We get to make things every day.”

“I get it,” I say, but I’m annoyed. Stella sees teaching as beneath her, she does, and I’m the one who’s given up translation to do it full-time. She has the luxury of no children, of not taking care of her sister, of not being bound to this place, her mother.

“Aunt Stell,” says Amanda.

“Not now, sweetie,” she says and pulls her hand from Amanda. “So you’re mad now?”

I don’t say anything. She rolls her eyes and flings the covers off. They settle with a rustle.

“I’m always telling you to spend more time translating,” she says. “*That’s* what you love.”

Amanda looks at Stella and then at me. She whispers to Barbara, “Dollhouse,” and she slides backwards off the bed until her skirt is up at her chest, and then she turns and runs to her room, her feet thudding across the carpet and down the hall.

“You could have done what you wanted to do, too, Junie. Gotten your PhD, translated. It’s what you wanted and you just didn’t do it. You chose this.”

“I *couldn’t* once I moved back here, could I? There’s Mary, and mom. You have no idea, the bills are sinking us! *Sinking us!*”

She slides out from under the covers and stands up.

“What do you mean sinking you?”

I shouldn't tell her this.

“Gerald didn't tell you?”

She shakes her head.

“Nevermind, then,” I say. “Same as before. Just the hospital bills, that's all. Forget it.”

She squints. “I thought Aunt Grace gave you enough to cover the hospital.”

“Well, she gave us all she could,” I say. I don't want to tell her, how I've sunk us, how the car was taken and soon the house will be taken, too. That Gerald's going to lose his job. At least he's with me in hiding this for now, from the town, and even from Stella. The humiliation of those losses in front of people like Katherine and all the other new people.

“Why don't you come to New Mexico? Just leave this for awhile? We can help you with money to move.”

I shake my head. New Mexico is not the answer. New Mexico won't make us any money.

“I won't leave Mary and Mom.”

“What about translating? Don't you want to get back to that?”

I don't tell her that I have been, in little slices and sneaks of time, translating again. That it is another of my secrets. Because if I tell her, it might all slip away. It is too tenuous. It could so easily be talked away—poof—magic gone.

“Okay,” she says, and lets her arms fall at her sides. She turns, shaking her head. I hear her walk down the hall, into Amanda's room, and say in a softer voice,

“I’m sorry, Amanda. Will you show me your dollhouse?” and Amanda tells her about each room, and the furniture, and the perfect miniature family inside.

MAIL

That afternoon, while Amanda and Stella nap together in her room—Stella on the mattress on the floor, Amanda in her crib—I go out to the end of the driveway to get the mail. I’m barefoot, and the pavement is hot even though it’s three o’clock and the sun is falling.

Then I see—Jeannie walks towards me with a pie in hand.

“Hey June!” she says. She smiles, still wearing a black uniform—t-shirt and shorts. “So glad I caught you! I made so many pies this week, I thought I’d bring one by since Stella’s here. I’ve been dying to say hello. And it was so nice of you to leave that card.”

I turn to face her, one hand on the mailbox.

Her hips slide side to side, exaggerated. It’s a new walk that she’s adopted to go with her new dialect.

“It’s cherry, your favorite, I know.”

She stands in front of me and holds out the pie, crust perfectly browned and with red oozing out over the sides, with both hands. It looks like a good pie. No wonder Danielle hired her. The crust won’t be as good as mine—no one’s is, never quite as light and flakey with just the right amount of salt—but this one looks pretty good.

“Here you go. Thank you for that card, really. Later, I’ll take Amanda for a couple of hours if you and Stella want some time alone.”

“Thanks, Jeannie.”

I let the front of the mailbox fall open, and take the pie from her.

“How sweet of you.”

“Well, I know that you might feel bad, getting fired, and that I got your job, and I thought, this would be a little gesture, you know, to say I’m sorry and I hope we’re still friends.”

She puts one hand across her stomach, the other to the back of her neck.

“Fired?”

She nods.

“I wasn’t *fired*.” I glance back at the house, the open door, to see if Stella’s nearby. Did she hear that?

“Well, that’s what Bruce told me. He said Carla saw you—oh, nevermind,” she says, and swats one hand in the air. This is to get me intrigued, I know, and I should ignore her and turn into the house, forget the mail, just walk away. But.

“Saw me what?”

“Uh. Well there’s this rumor going around the orchard.”

Shit.

“Just *say* it, Jeannie. Spit it out.”

“Carla saw you up in the orchard one day with Tony, and then she saw you leave with him from the orchard one afternoon when you were supposed to be working—she told me, in confidence, that you were spending so much time with him

that you haven't been to work, and that's why Danielle fired you. Because of," she drops her voice to a stage whisper, "the affair."

There's a clatter and a smash at my feet, Jeannie shrieks, there's something oozing over my toes. I look down, and there's the pie crust and cherries and broken glass, cherry red across my feet.

"Don't move, Junie, you'll cut your feet. Just stay there and I'll get—"

She has her hands out to me, as if she can hold me still, fingers splayed.

I turn away, toward the house, ignoring the glass and the pie, leaving the mailbox open—I realize later—and walking into the house.

"June," she says, walking alongside me, "June, I'm sorry, but I thought you knew that people were saying it. June? Don't be embarrassed. We've all slipped here and there, some way or another."

I walk into the front door, and close it behind me. Simon trots up and sniffs at the hem of my dress, then licks my toes. I stand with my back against the door. Jeannie knocks, calls my name, screaming, "June! JUUUUNE!" and finally gives up and walks away.

The glass.

"Simon, no!" I shoo him away, tiptoe to the kitchen, and soak a towel to wipe off my feet.

I *am* bleeding, I see, once I wipe off the cherry. There's one cut along the side of my foot that's going to need stitches.

"June?" Stella calls from the bedroom. "You okay?"

"Fine!" I holler.

Blood drips onto the floor in heavy drops, then slides towards the front door, this tilted house. I walk toward the kitchen, trailing blood. I can't go to the emergency room. We can't afford the copay. It's two hundred dollars, plus whatever the stitches cost. We haven't met our deductible yet this year.

How am I going to pay for *anything* without the orchard? The credit card bills, Amanda's diapers. At least with potty training soon—I hear her calling me, *Momma!*, from upstairs. I wrap paper towels around my foot and press hard, then open a drawer and pull out the packing tape, and wrap that tight around the towels. This will do. I walk on my heel to help it stop bleeding. It twinges now, the pain setting in after the shock.

“Coming, sweetie,” I call.

Stella appears at the top of the stairs with Amanda on her hip. She sees me hobbling towards her, and looks down at my foot, with its inches of paper towels and twisted tape, then finds the trail of blood to the kitchen.

“What happened? Are you okay?”

I chuckle. “Just banged my foot on the corner of the baseboards, a little cut, that's all.”

“That's a lot of blood for a little bang.”

Amanda squirms in Stella's arms. “Momma,” she says.

“I'm okay.”

Through the window to my right, I see Jeannie at the end of the driveway with a dustpan and a broom, sweeping up the mess. She's very careful, and looks for little shards. Then she dumps it into a paper bag and turns back to her house.

Stella walks downstairs with Amanda. “You can’t get down yet, sweetie, till we clean up.”

I hobble back to the kitchen, pull off more towels, and wet them in the sink. The blue ceramic sink that Gerald installed himself, his own anniversary present to himself. When I turn off the faucet, the water keeps dripping. This house always needs fixing.

I kneel down and wipe up the floor. Stella sets Amanda in her booster seat and clips her belt.

“Can we go to the orchard today?” says Stella. “I’ve been dying to see Danielle.”

I sigh, circling the floor, my blood crimson on the towel.

“I only have a couple of days left,” she says.

Great.

“Of course. Yes, of course. Tomorrow?”

“Want a snack, Amanda?”

“Snack,” she says. It comes out, *sack*.

“Yes, tomorrow,” says Stella.

Stella opens the cupboard door, and I walk to the couch, my foot throbbing now. I can feel my pulse in it. Stella asks Amanda if she wants bananas and peanut butter, she moves through the fridge, while Amanda sits in her chair sucking her finger, still waking up.

“Momma,” she says.

“I’m here, little bird.”

I put my foot up on the coffee table and lean my head back on the couch, thinking of what everyone's saying, what they believe about me, and what they know.

"Junie," says Stella. When I open my eyes, she's standing over me. "Your foot's bleeding through the paper towels."

She points.

I look down, and there it is, red seeping through. I sit up.

"Oh, it just needs another layer, I think."

She kneels down over me, before I can move, and peels off the tape and the towels.

"Stop, Stella, it's *fine*, stop."

I put my hands over hers and try to stop her from uncovering my foot. I don't want her to see, to insist I go to the hospital.

"Come on, leave it, Stell."

She's taken off the last of the paper towels, the one that clings to my skin, and the blood drips off onto the carpet, big fat drops.

"Junie! You're bleeding a lot. A *lot*."

"It's fine."

I grab one of the towels and press it against my foot, cross my leg over my knee so it's elevated.

"The bleeding just hasn't stopped yet."

"You need to go to the hospital," she says. She's angry, her face is red. This is Stella pressed up against worry.

"Momma," says Amanda, her voice whiny. "Momma, down."

“In a minute, honey,” I say.

Stella goes to the kitchen and takes Amanda out of her chair, carries her over to me, and says, “Stand up, June.”

“No.”

“Stand up and walk with me, or I’m calling an ambulance.”

I keep my hand pressed to my foot, and I don’t move.

“Get. UP,” she says.

I shake my head.

“You need stitches. What is wrong with you?”

Amanda whimpers, and then starts crying hard. She leans down for me, saying
momma, momma. I don’t look up.

“We can’t afford it.”

“You what?”

I turn and look up at her. “We can’t afford the hospital. I can’t go.”

She jounces Amanda up. “It’s okay, Panda, hold on.”

Amanda wails.

“Give her to me.” I hold out my arms for her, and Stella lets her reach to me. I
hold her against my chest with one arm, the other still against my foot.

“What do you mean?” she says, quieter now. She sits down beside us. Amanda
quiets.

“Shhhh, shhhhh.”

I rock side to side.

She goes quiet, sniffles, her hand holding onto the collar of my shirt, strong little fist.

“We don’t have anything. I’m not at the orchard anymore, and the house payments are late.”

“How late?”

I stare down, rest my head against Amanda’s, keeping her between me and Stella. I don’t want to see her face.

Her voice drops an octave, calm now. “How late.”

“Almost three months.”

Amanda’s hair smells like baby shampoo, beeswax, violets. My stomach clenches. I’m ashamed. I can’t look at Stella.

“Okay,” says Stella, “And what else?”

I sigh. I may as well say it all.

“Credit cards are maxed out.”

“And Gerald’s job,” she says.

Amanda squirms, then settles against my shoulder again.

“Momma,” she whispers.

“Yup,” I say. “His job.”

If he loses his job, we’ll have nothing. My job isn’t enough to sustain us. Thirty-four thousand a year, minus taxes. Maybe if they need me full-time this year, or if I could get a job in another town. But no one’s hiring foreign language teachers now, especially not French. I should have majored in Spanish, like Danielle. Stella puts her hand on my arm, then rubs Amanda’s back.

“Oh, Panda,” she says, and puts her face into Amanda’s until she smiles, then laughs against me, her chest rising into mine.

“Nella,” she says, and leans into Stella. I feel her warmth leave me, and Stella stands up with her, spins her in circles until Amanda laughs again. She flops back down beside me, and Amanda slides off Stella’s lap, headed for her box of toys beside the fireplace.

Stella puts her hand on my back again. “I’m sorry, June. I didn’t know.”

“Also?” I say.

“Yeah?” She keeps her hand on me, and waits.

“The car was repossessed. We owed eight hundred more on it, that’s it, but I couldn’t make the payments, and they took it just before you got here.”

“Oh.” She pauses. “That’s why we’re driving mom’s?”

I nod. She watches me, but I still don’t look at her. She runs her hand over my head, then pushes a piece of hair behind my ear so she can see me.

“Hospital’s on me,” she says. “I’m selling plenty of quilts now, remember? Let’s go.” She puts her hand on my knee.

“You don’t know when that’ll dry up,” I say. “You said so. You need to save that money.”

“No arguments.”

She stands up, takes my hand, and pulls me up off the couch.

STITCH ME UP.

At the hospital with Stella, there's a new doctor on duty, Dr. Preston, who is young and professional. When I say, "I've never had stitches," she hears my fear and tells me she's stitched up a thousand wounds and that it only hurts when she gives the anesthetic. I hold up my foot, hold it very still even when she injects the local with that long needle so close to the cut. It burns. I grip the sheet covering the plastic mattress. Stella rubs my shoulder with one hand, holding Amanda with the other.

"Momma has a owie," says Amanda.

"I'm okay." I smile at Amanda.

"How did this happen?" asks Dr. Preston, gloved hands on my heel and toes. I can't feel my heel anymore.

"I slammed my foot into the corner of the baseboards. It was stupid." I laugh, going for a characteristic oh-it's-nothing chuckle.

She leans closer to my foot, with clear glasses on over her eyes.

"You have to wear goggles now?" I say.

"Regulation," says Dr. Preston.

Stella holds Amanda, rocks her side to side, and Amanda rests her head on Stella's shoulder, almost tired again.

"Nope," says Dr. Preston, "this doesn't look like a wound from a wooden corner. And there's no bruising from the impact."

I close my eyes, darkening out the fluorescent lights and trying to close off the sounds of machines around me—a beeping heart monitor, wheels rolling down a hall, nurses relaying patient information. I've been here before, three years ago, with Mary. It was this place, Emerson Hospital, this emergency room. Her body convulsing and

covered with cuts and glass, blood all over her face before they cleaned her up. I open my eyes.

“If you ask *me*,” she says, moving the needle in and out of my skin, grotesque, “it looks like glass.”

She looks up from her stitches and looks at my face. I lean on my elbows to get a better look at the cut, as if to assess whether or not it was from the baseboards.

“Do you feel safe at home, June?” she says, as she stitches.

Oh, god, she thinks I’m being abused?

“Yes.”

I keep leaning forward.

“Don’t move, please.”

And then I see my skin, the swelling around the wound, and I notice that there’s a needle in my skin, and black thread woven in and out like my skin is cloth, with blood oozing on both sides.

I’ve never fainted before, not the night that I took care of Mary here, nor any of the nights after. Fainting is Stella’s thing. She’s the one who’d run down the hall to the bathroom, to throw up, to throw water on her face. But here she is, watching me, holding Amanda, being *the strong one*, and here, I black out.

HIDING

“I went and asked Jeannie,” says Stella.

I’ve just woken up from a nap, and I’m lying in bed. My foot is propped up on the pile of pillows that Stella brought from the couch.

“Asked her what?” I say. I know exactly what she asked her. I’m going to have to tell Stella everything now.

The phone rings, and Stella answers.

“She’s fine, mom,” says Stella. “We’ll call you in a little bit.”

“You told *mom*?” I’m annoyed now. Our mother has to be in on this?

“Hey. She’s your mother. What do you want me to do?”

“*Not* tell mom.”

Stella rolls her eyes. Her blonde curls have gone frizzy, and the light makes a halo behind her head. Suddenly, she’s little Stella, dancing on the table, pounding on my door to play with me. I soften. I remember.

“You’re right,” I say.

She nods. Walks to Gerald’s side of the bed, near the bathroom, and flops down.

“The doctor said it was glass you stepped on.”

I play with the edge of the quilt, running my hands over its red binding. I love the red against the white top.

“And I heard Jeannie pounding on the door, right before. So I went over and asked her, and she said she dropped a pie plate.”

“Oh? Oh, yeah, I guess that could have been it. But, I also bumped my foot when I came in, and I couldn’t figure out what did it.”

Stella laughs. “Try harder, Junie, I’m not buying that one.”

I turn to the window, to my tree, I imagine Mary sitting out on the windowsill, smoking a cigarette, looking cool, looking in. *Oh, tell her, Junie, what’ve you got to*

lose? says Mary. She smiles, blue eyes shaded and dark. She laughs, then recedes, disappears.

I turn to Stella.

“Fine. It was the pie plate.”

Stella rolls to her side to face me, juts out her chin. “I *know*,” she says. “So why didn’t you just say so in the first place? What’re you hiding?”

My foot throbs. Suddenly, I feel the hurt more, and I miss having Mary to talk about this with, miss Mary and her laughter, her rosy cheeks, her belief that I could do anything—be the scholar I wanted to be, translate, who believed that I was just as smart as her, though I knew our father didn’t believe it. She did. That mattered. I miss her wild, secretive nights. Her irreverence, how she could cajole me into sneaking out with her, now and again, when she came back from college and I was still in high school.

I turn to Stella, the sister I have left. The one who’s always been the youngest, the sweetest, the one to make the family laugh, the one to flee from us, too—to live in a commune in New Mexico, to hide herself from our problems, from Mary as she is now, as if, because we never let her in enough, she’s keeping us out now.

Try her, says Mary.

“I’m hiding Tony,” I say. “It’s just a friendship. But it’s something, like—”

She smiles a little, and she doesn’t scoff, and she doesn’t roll her eyes.

“Like what?” she says.

“It’s going to sound stupid.”

“Tell me.”

Try her.

“I haven’t had anyone to talk to for so long. Gerald’s off doing his research at Blanchard, and confiding in Nadine, that woman you met—”

“The one you’ve been jealous of,” she says.

“Yes, but that’s not the point. It’s that I haven’t had anyone. I’ve been lonely, and dealing with Mom and Mary all on my own.”

“I’ve helped. I sent you guys money.”

I stop her, my hand raised. “I know. It’s not an accusation. I’m just saying—I’ve been lonely. And then Tony came back. Remember how we’d play together when we were little, off in the woods, at the treehouse, or in the swamp? Remember how he couldn’t skip, and he thought he was a cowboy from those sixties movies his dad watched?”

“Yeah.” She smiles. “I remember. You adored each other.”

“Well.” I wait for the judgment. “He came back. And he’s been my friend. We just talk, you know?”

I watch the quilt on my lap, raise my good knee and the comforter at my feet rustles. Stella must have brought it in for me.

“I know,” she says. She smiles, and puts her hand on my stomach, and says in a sad voice, “I get it. You needed someone. I’m sorry, June. I’m really sorry.”

I nod. That’s just what it is. And then I cry. She leans over and hugs me, and I lean into her, grateful for my sister, now, grateful that she didn’t judge me for this.

And I could tell her all the rest, too.

“I’ve met with Alan Ball,” I say. “Tony told me it was a good idea, and I did, and we talked.”

“Who’s Alan Ball?”

Of course she doesn’t remember. She wasn’t here to see him before the accident, nor after, but I don’t care. Move past it, I tell myself.

“Her friend from Tufts. And he told me all kinds of things about Mary. She was taking pills, and stealing them from the clinic to give to her friends.”

“She *what?*”

Stella looks incredulous. She knew about the pills—we found bottles of pills all over Mary’s apartment when we cleaned it out the winter after the accident. But she didn’t know she was stealing them. We figured she was hiding them in those animal pill bottles.

“I tried to call you to talk about it,” I say, “but you thought I was pushing for another treatment, and it seemed easier to leave it alone. I don’t know what to do about it, anyway.”

She shakes her head and closes her eyes. “She was stealing pills?”

“Yeah.” My foot throbs. I lean back against the pillows and wait for Stella to take this in.

“And when she left here to drive back to Grafton that day she came to try on her dress with me at Mrs. McCrae’s? She was high that day, you knew that, right?”

“You told me, when the report came back at the ER, that there was speed in her blood.”

“Right, well, Alan thinks maybe her addiction to the pills got worse because their friend killed himself in the clinic, with an animal IV.”

“What’re you talking about? Why haven’t you told me any of this?”

I shrug. Why haven’t I told anyone? Because too much has been happening, because

whenever I try to talk to Stella, she’s too busy, because everyone’s tired of hearing about Mary.

“I told Gerald about Dad knowing the winter Dad told me. You knew that, though. We talked about that at the funeral.”

“I knew about that. But not the stealing, and not the suicide. She was stealing them from the clinic?”

“Yeah.” What can I say to make Stella feel better? Nothing. I let it all sink in.

“You haven’t wanted to talk when I call,” I say.

“I always assume it’s more trials, more money to sink into Mary’s care.” She pauses. “I’m sorry.”

Finally, I’m not alone in all the knowing.

“Dr. Smalls says we have to move her by the end of summer. We can’t afford to keep her at the rehab center, but if we send her to that nursing home, she’s never going to come back. She started talking again earlier this summer, you know.”

Stella leans back against the pillows. “Junie,” she says, “hasn’t it occurred to you that Mary might not *want* to come back? She was stealing pills; she had to have been miserable. Maybe this is it.”

We don't look at each other. We just sit, quiet. Is this it? What choice do we have now? We're at the end of the financial rope, so they say, and Dr. Smalls has said she has to move. My mother doesn't know that he can't be put off forever, that he risked his certification for our sister.

"I told Danielle we'd stop by the orchard tomorrow morning," says Stella.

"You went to the orchard?"

She nods. "While you were napping. I took Amanda with me."

"Detective Stella."

All the secrets she'll know. Everything Danielle, or Carla and Bruce, for that matter, might have told her.

"It's not like that," she says. "I want to help."

I pull my hands into my sleeves. She wants to help. I don't want to go to the orchard, not at all. Something bad will happen. It's inevitable. If I can just avoid the orchard until Stella's gone, until Tony's left town, until—fall, maybe until fall—then all of this will simmer and die down, and no one will know I've been spending time with Tony. The house won't be foreclosed on. No one will know we—I—lost our car.

"My foot's too tender," I say. "I should stay in bed."

She shakes her head. "I already told Danielle. She's expecting us."

A wall. Pressed up against it. Stella's not this tough, usually. Why now? I want to scream. Instead, drily, I answer:

"I didn't think you were this confrontational."

She puts her arm around my shoulders.

“Just trying to help,” she says, and it isn’t smug or knowing. She’s being genuine.

“Before I leave.”

I resent her *before I leave*, because she can always go—she always does go—she isn’t bound here as I am now. My foot throbs, more painful again, as if the blood just dropped through my body to the wound. I’m tired. So tired.

Mary would tell me to forgive her. She was always gentler with Stella, maybe because they were further apart in age. When we were younger, we were all close, but as we got older, Stella drifted to her friends and Mary and I became closer. In high school, I’d get annoyed at Stella’s dramatics—lecturing us on the sins of eating meat while Mom made our favorite meatballs, for example—but Mary would say, “Stella’s just Stella. Be nice to her when I leave for college. Be patient.” So: Stella is here for the moment, and at last, she is helping. At least in this moment, I forgive her the years of running away after Mary’s accident, of leaving me to take care of Mary and our mother alone. She’s my little sister again, beside me. We’re wrapped in all the memories of our childhood together, when we three were bound as friends. Now, it’s just us two. And isn’t this what I need, after all? Hasn’t Tony been saying to accept the help I’m given? I lean over, and rest my head against her chest. I let her comfort me.

IN THE BLACK POND, SWIMMING

She was beside me, and I was not a good swimmer yet. I hadn’t started swim team, hadn’t raced the boys across the pond in the night, that week I would kiss Tony. Years

before this, I swam with Mary. I clung to the edge of the raft in the middle of the pond, and I was scared.

There are snapping turtles, I said.

Not many, she said. They'll stay away from you. I can't make it the whole way across. It's too far.

You can, she said. You're a good swimmer. You just don't trust yourself. Remember how I taught you to breathe? That rhythm of it?

Yeah, I said.

Do it, she said. Put your head in the water before we go.

I closed my eyes. I lowered my head, face into the water.

Turn left, breathe in, face into the water, breathe out. Turn right, breathe in, face into the water, breathe out. Push the air all the way out. Suck it all the way in. Left, down, right, down, left, down, right, down.

She touched my arm.

Good, she said. Okay, let's go.

I looked at her.

Don't give me that pout, she said. Come on, you can do it. Let go of the raft. I pressed my fingers harder into it. Junie.

She pulled my fingers off, one by one. We were both treading water then.

What about what happened to Dara? I said. She couldn't do it.

That was Dara, she said. It was too cold to swim then, and she was really little.

Now it's summertime. This is you. Come on.

I groaned.

Here we go, she said. It'll be fun. You'll see. You'll feel so good on the other side.

She turned away and started swimming, arms rising and dropping, pushing the water past

her body as she'd taught me to do. Cup the palm and follow the curve of the hips, the leg, then back out. She did not stop to see if I was coming. She kept swimming. I stayed there, treading water. Mary! I said. Mary! If she heard me, she did not stop to say so. She kept on going. I was still treading water, and I was scared. I looked down into the water, could see my hands, my legs, my feet, but nothing below them – all just green, then murky, then dark.

So dark.

The rhythm of it, she said. Put your face in the water.

All right.

I thought of Ms. Chardell and her metronome. One, two, three, one, two, three, her

ridiculous stories, her door that opened to the springtime. I thought of Stella who was still too little to do this. Only Mary and I were allowed to swim here alone.

I put my head into the water, and I followed her.

We swam all the way across, me following her, and I was scared most of the way. Left,

down, right, down. In, out, in, out. By the end, my arms were burning, my thighs burning. But, when we were fifty feet from the other shore, I looked up at the trees,

treading water for a second, and I thought: this is not so hard. Once you're moving. I put my head back in and finished. And she was right. When my feet touched sand on the other side, it felt so good. To turn and look back and see all that water we'd crossed.

See? she said. You're still alive. Still got all your fingers and toes? I looked down at my hands.

Yup, I said. No turtles.

Told you.

And we sat down in the sand, all wet, breathing hard, until we were rested and could swim back again. I wasn't so afraid the second time across. It got easier. She was right.

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SOMNAMBULISM

When we get to the orchard, it's eight am, and everyone's busy. Carla and Bruce trot across the front of the barn, cross the road, into the far orchard. Probably looking for Danielle. Omar drives the truck down from the orchards in the back—I can see him for a moment up on the hill, then he disappears behind the barn and the roar of the truck gets louder. A crew of high schoolers carry boxes into the barn, and Jeannie screeches, "Over there!"

I don't want to get out of the car. I don't belong here anymore, strange now that I'm the outsider.

"You go in," I say. "My foot hurts too much."

Stella turns off the ignition, and Amanda kicks my seat and sings to herself.

"No time like the present," she says.

I roll my eyes and look out my window. "You sound just like mom."

We climb out. I use my crutches, awkward, wobbling on the stone drive. Stella gets Amanda out and holds her hand.

And then we're back in it, the rush of the day, Jeannie trotting up to say hello and swooping Amanda up over her head, Carla waving as she passes, Manuel patting my back as he walks past. "You okay, June? You look good!" He doesn't stop for answers.

The work swirls around us.

"Who's a sweet baby?" says Jeannie to Amanda, her face a big grin.

Amanda giggles.

Stella waits, and then: "Seen Danielle around, Jeannie?"

Jeannie holds Amanda on her hip, and Amanda leans into her shoulder, then squirms to get down.

"They're at Mr. McNally's house," she says. "Thought you knew—Gerald's here with them and Nadine and that lawyer."

I look at Stella. Gerald's here? I thought he'd gone to work.

"They've been here everyday for the last week," Jeannie says.

Stella's right eyebrow rises, a trick she's been able to do since she was little. We used to call her Sherlock.

"A week?" says Stella.

So he knows I'm not working at the orchard anymore. Has Danielle told him anything?

The walk to the house seems to take an hour, with me hobbling on the road and Stella beside me, silent. Amanda stayed with Jeannie in the barn (Jeannie begged to 'hang onto this one'). And there's dread, thick and dark, inside me. Gerald knows I haven't been working, and he hasn't said anything. Does he know why Danielle fired me? Has she told him about Tony? I keep my eyes on the ground, on each raised tuft of grass in the center of the road, and the pebbles and stones in the gulleys on either side. Don't trip, I tell myself. Stay steady. Crutches forward, my right leg swings to the front, sets down on the solid ground, crutches back and free, then forward. My armpits are sore and sweaty, and there's a trickle of sweat from my breasts down to my belly. I feel it sliding down. August in wetland Massachusetts: hot and humid, mosquitoes and crickets and now the dog day cicadas, which start their buzzing as soon as night falls. I try to think about those sounds, settling me, quiet: dusk and its sounds. I imagine it with the rhythm of the crutches.

Then we arrive, there's the front door, and they emerge: Nadine first, who sees me and pauses. Smiles. Wary. So Gerald's told her I'm jealous. And I'm ashamed and furious. I feel betrayed. I think of Tony, and my hypocrisy. How can I be jealous of Nadine

when I'm running off with Tony every chance I get? What does it matter, now, if Gerald betrayed me? Then Gerald comes out, and Danielle, Romero, Terence, the lawyer Paulo, and Omar.

There's a pause, a strangeness, as if no one is sure what to do. Who should greet us? What should be said? We line up facing each other, an old west stand-off. Let's see who'll draw first.

Quiet. Someone clears his throat, the lawyer or Gerald, I'm not sure. I try to smile at Nadine but it emerges as a sneer. I can feel it all wrong on my face. I'm too angry to hide it. Way up the hill behind us in the orchard, someone hollers and there's a crashing sound.

Danielle says, "Hey June. Hi, Stell." She raises one hand. This is the first she's said to me in two weeks, the longest we've gone without talking since I returned home to Bolton three years ago.

"Hi," I say. "What just happened up there?" Why doesn't she look alarmed?

"Cutting down the old apple tree."

"Your grandfather's?" I say. She's always loved that tree, as a symbol of this orchard's heritage.

She nods and shrugs. "It was dead." She looks like she doesn't care. She's gone cold on me, too.

Gerald steps towards us. "What're you doing here?"

"I work here," I say. It comes out before I've had a chance to think. "I belong here," I say. I want to say: This is my place, not yours. You're the outsider now.

"Worked," says Danielle.

“I meant, just right now. What’re you doing here right now?” says Gerald.

She crosses her arms. I watch Gerald. Did he know that already? He doesn’t wince or look to Danielle. He watches me. Raises his eyebrows, asking: You gonna come clean now? Or keep on lying? I know his face. I know what every expression means. Every twitch of muscle. I’ve been watching that face for more than twenty years all told, and have seen the sag arrive, and long ago, the slice and scar of his drunken father’s broken plate across one eyebrow. The twitch of one cheek when he tries not to cry. The flush of delight when he gets good news. He’s fair skinned. He blushes easily. I think of us in bed the other night, the sound of his body against mine, the groans. Does he think of those moments, too? Or is he so angry now that even that night feels like a betrayal, as if I was only playing his wife for a moment amidst all the lies.

“I’d better run,” says Nadine, and she holds a folder close to her chest, giving Paulo a nod to follow her. “Good to see you, June,” she says with just a glance towards me.

“Mm-hm,” I say.

Stella nudges me. Hard. *Don’t be an ass.*

“Bye,” I say, but it still comes out hard. I shift my weight from one crutch to the other, armpits dripping sweat down my sides. My back aches on one side, no longer that sharp tinge but this dull throbbing constant.

“Can we talk, Danielle?” I say.

Gerald looks between us. “I guess we’ll talk later, then,” he says to me.

He’s about to walk off, when Carla and Bruce find us.

“Jeannie asked us to get more bags,” says Bruce. “but we’re out.”

He looks between us, realizing that he’s walked into something. He turns to me and looks from my crutches down to my bandaged foot.

“What happened to *you*?” he says.

“We need more bags?” says Danielle.

“Yeah,” says Carla. “But we’re all out, and Jeannie says she can’t find the order form, and she doesn’t know what to do if we don’t have them by the weekend.”

I snort. “Sounds like she’s panicking,” I say. “Surprise, surprise.”

But didn’t she help me? I shouldn’t throw her under the bus.

“She fine,” says Danielle to me. And to Bruce and Carla, “Tell her I’ll help her in a minute.”

“She says the order has to be in by noon,” says Bruce, “or we won’t have them by the weekend.”

Danielle holds up one hand. “Got it,” she says. “Be there in a minute. Where’s Manuel? He can help.”

“Went for a walk,” Carla says.

“A walk?” says Danielle, incredulous. She leans forward. “Is everyone disappearing on me?”

Bruce cackles. “Right?” he says.

I could do the right thing, in this moment. I could free Romero by turning in Bruce. He’s the vagrant, the malcreant, the one making trouble in town with his friends. I glance over at Gerald. He has a legal pad under one arm, with his messy handwriting

across one page in blue ink. He's trying to help. Nadine is trying to help—that goddamned woman. The lawyer is trying to help. Danielle is putting everything into Romero's case.

And if I help to clear his name, won't that cast me in a better light in their eyes, too? So it isn't just generosity, or my morality, but also the thing that will help me?

"Bruce," I say.

I clear my throat.

He turns to me. His eyes narrow. He knows this isn't going to be good.

I watch him. He shakes his head, slightly, side to side. "Don't do it," he whispers. "Or you know what."

"What did he say?" says Gerald.

Danielle takes a step closer. "What's going on?"

Carla's bottom lip quivers. She knows, too, then.

A flock of birds flies overhead crying. Are they migrating already?

My breath is short. What am I doing. I am doing it, though, I am.

"Bruce," I say again.

"*What, already?*" he says.

"Tell Danielle what you took."

He shakes his head, and his eyes are ferocious. He has a new piercing on his nose, and I see his skin is red around the hoop.

"I warned you, Junie," he says. "Remember?"

"Is he threatening you?" says Danielle. "Bruce, come off of it."

"What's the matter?" says Gerald, to me.

“Tell her what you took,” I say. “That night your friends came to get you. What did you take?”

He shrugs.

Carla’s crying now. She sniffles. “He didn’t do it,” she says. She shakes her head. “It wasn’t *him*.”

“Tell her,” I say.

He turns to Danielle. “I saw Junie in the woods with Tony. They kissed,” he says. “That’s what I know.”

Gerald turns to me. “Are you fucking kidding?” he says.

He’s wan, his mouth open. Stella touches my back, then steps away from from us, backwards.

The birds swarm, a black swirl, then land in the trees around us. Calling to each other, high cries. Seeking food. They’ll eat the fruit. Someone needs to scare them off with the sound of the rifle shooting blanks.

“Is that true?” says Gerald. “Junie?”

I watch him, now, waiting, and then there’s a heave up from within me, the black of the pond, the silence, the splash—a wave made to slosh ashore.

“Yes,” I say. “I kissed him once.”

Bruce scoffs. “Once, my ass,” he says.

“It was one time,” I say, my eyes still on Gerald. “Once. That was it.”

Gerald shakes his head. He stares at me, and screams, one big call, desperate, up at the sky. All the birds lift off from their branches, squawking, mad, swirl into a black mob that dips and rises, away.

Go south, birds. Things aren't good here.

Gerald's breathe gives, and he's silent. Hands on his knees, bent forward.

"Gerald, it was one time. We're only friends, I promise."

He won't look at me. He shakes his head. He rises, slowly. Runs his hand over his forehead. And walks away.

"Gerald!" I say. I turn on my crutches, but I can't catch him even if I want to. And I don't. I don't want to try now. I let him go.

"Tell Danielle!" I say. "Tell her that *you* took that bike and the screwdriver. Tell her!"

He looks at Danielle, a smirk on his face.

"Yeah," he says. "I took that bike. So what?"

His voice is full of teenage overconfidence. He's angry, and he thinks he's invincible. We can't hurt him, he's saying in that tone. Go to hell.

CHAINSAW

Stella still has Amanda—she took her for a walk to give me space—and I'm alone in the house, pacing, thinking, my throat burning from too-hot tea that Stella made me before she left, and Tony, and this town with its gossip, and Danielle, who fired me, and Gerald who's gone now, maybe for good—I thought, if I came home, he'd be here, waiting to yell at me, to vent his fury, but he's gone and won't answer his phone. I think of Mary in the hospital, Mary waiting, Mary staring off and sleeping, and

Willow who found her that day on the highway. When she was high, from stealing animal meds.

This makes sense, then, my plan, and I walk out back, full of energy again, and I get the chainsaw from the shed. Gerald keeps it for when we have to clean up the yard; there was one year, after a hurricane, when we had four trees down, and he showed me how to use it, and I took care of one. A smaller one, but still.

It's an old machine, orange, and I check the tank: full. Quick sting of gas in my nose. I screw the top back on, haul it up off the floor, and carry it to the car. Throw it into the trunk. This old beater of a car, when's it going to break down, when are going to have to stop sinking money into it and give it up. Can't buy a new one, that's for sure. And this house? When will they come to take the house?

I stalk back out to the shed, and move aside the rakes and hoes and shovels, and there, leaning against the back wall, is what I want: the axe. If one won't do, the other will. I'm sweating now, August heat pressing in on me.

I take the axe back to the car, throw it into the back seat, and get into the drivers seat. Slam the door. Start the car, its engine rumbling. What's wrong now, car? What's wrong *now*?

I feel a rage.

I put the car into reverse, and back out of the driveway, and speed down the road, past Jeannie and Ed's, onto 117.

In the rearview mirror, I see Jeannie running into the road behind me, shouting, "Junie! JUNE!"

CHAINSAW, AND AXE

I pull onto 495, heading east, the same route Mary took. I have the axe in the back of the car. I grabbed the axe, and I also have the chainsaw. But that doesn't make sense—I'll use the chainsaw first, and then try the axe. Is what I'll do. I drive down the highway for fifteen minutes, exactly as long as Mary drove. I see the same things she'd have seen three years ago—the signs pointing to Boston, the Mile Marker 18, the Exit 53 sign, the trees arching along the side of the road, thick and green, and the red three-story house—which we always called ostentatious—whose chimney rises above the trees. Past Herbert's Candy and Ice Cream where we would get make-your-own sundaes, under the overpass where Tony and I, or Gerald and I, or Stella and Mary and I, would stop on our bikes and wave to the cars whizzing below. Where I am now. Almost there.

And that fucking tree, I see it from half a mile away. It isn't possible, but I do. It is there, waiting.

AWAY

I brought infant-Amanda to Mary's room. Mary and I were in the same hospital, Emerson, in Concord, two floors apart. As I breastfed Amanda, delighting in the feeling of motherhood, the touch of her lips against my skin, the rush of affection, this overwhelming love, I thought of Mary, upstairs, not knowing, not speaking, maybe not understanding. I opened my eyes the night after Amanda was born, and there was

Mary, sitting on the windowsill. She was smoking a cigarette. She said, *She's gorgeous, Junie. I think she got Grandma's coloring.*

Now, in front of her with Amanda sleeping in my arms, I said, "Look, Mary."

No one else was there. It was just us, me in the pink robe Gerald had bought just for this. I'd gotten one of the nurses to wheel us up. She'd left us here, to talk. (Against the rules, we had five minutes.)

Mary stared at us. The thick scars across her face. Stella hadn't been back since February; she'd be back in June, and when she came, she'd see how different Mary was. The scars fading. The tubes all gone—almost all gone. Still, the IV and the catheters.

I shifted Amanda in my arms so Mary could see her face. Mary's eyes shifted to me, and then shifted back up to the ceiling. Then shifted back again to Amanda. So she saw.

She let out a sigh.

My niece, she must have said. Then she closed her eyes and wouldn't open them again.

I leaned forward, pressing against Amanda.

"Mary," I said, "Her name's Amanda. Her middle name is Mary."

I stood up, and set Amanda in Mary's lap, so she could feel her body against her. I held Amanda's head up, and she kept on sleeping. She sighed, deeply, in and out. Did Mary feel her breath? I ran my free hand over Mary's wrist.

But Mary didn't open her eyes. She couldn't look at us anymore. Or she wouldn't.

Gerald came into the hospital early the next day, and we stayed bundled together in the hospital room all day long. He crawled into bed beside me. He laughed and laughed, looking at Amanda in the little rolling bed beside us, scooping her up and holding her between us. Small red face.

“We’re a family now,” he said. And he turned to me and kissed me.

Two days later, we came home from hospital and Gerald had to leave again for Michigan. He’d be back next weekend, and then for good in two more weeks. He was about to defend his dissertation. He was applying for jobs. He’d been flying back and forth to see us, and he was tired. I could see it in the dark underneath his eyes, and the way he shuffled his feet across the floors of the house.

He touched my cheek. He kissed me. My hands on his waist, I put my face against his chest. The feel of his hands against me. The way the feeling of him would fade from me over the days he was gone, seeping away, so that I was more a part of this house and less a part of that other life I’d made with him. A warmth slipping away. A rosiness.

* * *

BUNNIES WE FOUND

There were three of them, so small they could fit into one of my mother’s hands all together. Too young for proper fur, they had only fuzz: brown with white specks.

Mom said there wasn't much chance they'd survive without their mother, and we should know that going in. But she would try, she said, to help them. Stella ran upstairs and got her favorite baby blanket and said, "They can sleep in this." Mom told Mary to get a cardboard box from the shed, and Mary did, and we lined the box with the yellow blanket. Mom set the babies inside. They hardly even moved, little noses bobbing up and down in the air. We filled eye droppers with milk and water, a special combination, and we fed them five or six times a day, even in the middle of the night. Stella wanted to sleep beside them, but Mom said no, sometimes bunnies have diseases, and we all had to wash our hands every time we touched them.

The first one died the morning of the second day. We found it beside the other two, who snuggled with it, not even knowing it was gone. Mom took it out with one scooped hand, and we had a bunny funeral out back. Stella said, "You were a very nice bunny," and Mary said the Our Father, and then Dad nailed together a little wooden cross which we stuck in the ground at the head end of the bunny's grave. I cried a little, and so did Stella. Mary just looked sad.

The other two lived five more days, and then, snuggled against the hot water bottle, they died, too. We were at school when it happened, and Mom buried them before we even got home. "Wild animals can't live in captivity," I said. "We talked about it in school today." I ate macaroni and cheese with Stella and Mary at the kitchen table. We scooped it into our mouths like we didn't really care if we ate it. But Mom said we had to (and it did taste pretty good). Alligator came running into the kitchen with his tongue hanging out, the first time he was allowed in since the bunnies came. His toenails clicked on the wood floors, and we looked at him, and he laughed

with his upturned mouth and then made a little, “Yip” sound, like he wanted to play. Alligator didn’t understand our sorrow.

When Dad came home, he made us ice cream sundaes with cherries on top. They were good, too, even though we were still sad.

Dad said, “I’m sorry about the bunnies, but life goes on, girls. Eat up.”

The spoons were cold on our tongues. Mary got hers stuck there for a second, right on the tip, and we all watched her try to pull it away, the end of her tongue going with it, stuck. She looked down, cross-eyed, halfway between laughing hard and being scared, eyes opened wide, mouth in a grin, and a strange, hurting-happy sound coming staggered from her throat. The same sound we all felt, ricocheting through our guts.

* * *

CHAINSAW, AXE, TREE

God, it’s so easy now, to see! Why didn’t I do this years ago? I pull onto the shoulder of 495, and someone whizzes past me honking. I stick my hand out the window and give them the finger. Who do they think they are? I put my head out the window. I shout.

“Something sacred is happening here, *asshole!*”

I throw the car into park and get out, and the wind from the passing cars is strong, cools me, finally, from this heat. Two weeks of heat, and the humidity, and the

mosquitoes at night—this is the worst time of year in a swamp town. The peaches are ripe at the orchard. Jeannie’s picking peaches.

Ha! I laugh.

I go to the trunk, and take out the chainsaw. I’ll start with the chainsaw, of course.

Cars keep going past.

I pull it out of the trunk and carry it by its handle, leaning to one side. It’s heavier than I remembered.

There, in front of me, is the big old oak tree, with its scars across the middle. That’s where Mary’s car hit it. Three years ago. The bark is razed, and there are deep ruts through the tree, into its meat, the white bleached out by the sun. This big tree should have been taken down years and years ago, but someone—maybe even Danielle—some conservationist, saved it from that doom. A three hundred year old tree, they say. It’s on the Bolton landmark tour. Well.

I put the chainsaw down on the grass, which is brown with August heat, and I pull up the choke, fast, yanking my arm up into my body. That’s how Gerald showed me. It hurts my back. Nothing happens.

The cars speed by, and someone honks, shouts out the window, “Hey lady!” and then there’s cackling, the voice fading.

I reach down and try again, and then again, and each time, my back tightens. My foot throbs. I lean to my right.

Again, and again—and finally, a little chuckle from the engine. *Putt Putt Putt Putt*. Then dead.

“Come *on!*” I shout at it.

I pull again, and again, yanking up, breathing hard now, my left hand on the machine, my foot—the throbbing, again—and I wonder if the stitches burst. But I don’t stop. I pull up again, and this time, it catches, and the engine roars up. It’s that thick whine that makes me smell cut wood, fresh sawdust out behind the house. Gerald on a fall day, sleeves rolled up, in the back yard, sawdust speckled in his hair when he comes inside.

How he smells.

I pull the chainsaw up, and it vibrates in my arms, it takes both hands holding it tight—one on the handle, the other on the body.

And there’s the tree, just waiting, and I walk up to the tree, and set the blade against the bark, and the machine whines higher. It cuts, and the sawdust spins.

I laugh, loud, and someone behind me honks again, and people keep driving past.

“Yeeeeeees!” I say. And I press the blade in deeper, and then pull it back out again, because that’s what Gerald taught me—cut in strokes like this, diagonals to make a V. A tree won’t fall if you cut it through the middle with one slice. It has to be a V. Slice from the top, from the bottom, press, and be patient. I press harder into the bark. The flecks of wood fly into my face, sawdust covers me, and I feel so good! So good! To be *doing* something finally! I laugh harder. My arms vibrate and ache.

“YEAH!” I shout again. “YEAH!” Every time I press the blade against the wood.

Which way is the tree going to fall? I wonder.

This is what killed Mary, and now I am killing it. Fuck this tree, I think. I don't care. I'm done caring about things.

I pull the blade out, and press it back in again. Something in my foot pops, and I feel a rush of pain, and I know now for sure that the stitches have burst.

I don't care. I pull the chainsaw back out again, squinting my eyes against the splinters, feeling something catch in my face, a little twinge. Fine. I push the blade back in. I love its roar, I love its quick destruction. Ha! Yes! This is it! At last!

And then the engine dies, suddenly, as I pull it back again. Am I out of gas? I put it on the ground and open up the gas tank. Yes, the gas is gone.

Well. I look up at the tree. I've only made a small dent—a few inches—not enough to bring it down. I've just cut into the scar, really. My arms are tingling with the vibration of the chainsaw, my hands wanting to hold the shape of the chainsaw even when I put it down, and there's the smell of burning in the air. And what now?

But there's the axe; I was ready for this.

Sweat runs down my arms and stomach, soaking my shirt. I push my hair back with the back of my hand, and feel the flecks of wood and dust. I walk to the backseat, take the axe out through the open window, and stalk back to the tree. I see it ahead of me, and I feel that rage again, and a burst of energy, and I run for it—I race at the tree with the axe raised, and I roar, and I slam the blade into the tree to the right of where I'd been cutting before—where I was cutting is all torn up, a ravaged body, a bad cut, the wood in shards around the groove I made.

My foot is throbbing. I hold the axe in the tree, and look down at my foot, and there's blood on my canvas sneakers, soaking right through onto the grass. The doctor

told me that feet bleed a lot. Feet and faces, I learned when Mary was first hurt. It's not that bad, it just looks worse than it is. That's what I thought then. It's what I tell myself now. I yank the axe back out, and the cars keep going by, and I hear—far off—a siren.

I roar again, and tell the tree to die—I scream it, “Die, tree, die!” and slam the axe into the tree, and pull it back out again.

And it seems strange, now, that I'm telling the tree to die. It does. And I feel woozy, the world is spinning, the tree is waving a little back and forth, like a heat wave, like the landscape in a desert. I don't feel so—I sit down. The grass pricks my thighs. My foot, my foot is bleeding a lot. But it's fine. Feet bleed a lot. They do. I lean back against the tree. This is a three hundred year old tree. Gerald loves old things. Why am I killing this old thing? I hear the cars whiz past, I hear a siren, I see a bird circling in the sky, it's a hawk, a red-tailed hawk, and the axe slips out of my hand, and I'm tired, so tired, and I let my eyes close.

We're sitting together by the pond, still wet from the swim back and forth, sand sticking to our bottoms on the sand. We're young, but it's the present moment. Mary, I say, I've screwed everything up. Gerald's going to leave me now. What do I do? Can't you help me? I dig my feet into the sand with a sick feeling in my belly.

Mary laughs. Junie, you could get him back if you wanted to. But, this is your chance to fly. Don't you see? This is your chance to do your own thing, live your own life. You've missed translating, and school. Maybe you want that instead. Here's your opening. Didn't you screw it all up for a reason?

HOW BIRDS LIVE

Certain birds are called ostriches, and they have long white necks and bulbous bodies. This is what we learned in class today: Bulbous. Birds. There are other kinds of birds that swoop and dip and fly with their bright plumes into the great sky, and some that waddle all their days across the ice, black wings flapping even though they'll never take flight. There are some that live mostly in treetops and twitter back and forth from branch to branch. There are others that are awake only at night, going *hoo, hoo, whooooo are youuuu?* Others live in the earth, in holes in the sides of cliffs by the ocean in New Mexico or Ireland – *prime real estate*, says the teacher, *water view, ha ha*. We look at each other and shrug. Some birds live in the coldest parts of the world, and they store up extra body fat for easy living. These birds have to watch out for polar bears, the same color white as the snow, so hard to see, on the prowl for a snack. Some have to look up, into the sky, for hawks that will swoop down upon them for a meal. This is why hawks have white undersides, says the teacher, *camouflage*, which is a way of disguise. Others have to be careful on the ground – pigeons and doves and pheasants – because wolves and other sharp-toothed things will gobble them up in a happy bite. The ones that live in Florida and Africa have to look out for alligators and crocodiles, whose jaws will rise up from beneath and snap shut with these still-alive birds inside. Some birds, like pheasants and swans, mate for life, and if their mate dies, they will walk and squawk in a search for the one they loved. What they don't know, poor birds, is that he or she is never coming back. Being a bird is wonderful

with all that flying and swooping and singing into the sky, but it's terrible, too, because no one can explain the most important things to a bird, things we have parents and teachers to explain to us, the most difficult things – like why sometimes the other ones never come back, and what it means to fly, and where it is all those upwards-soaring souls go.

* * *

RABBI RONNIE CAHANA

“Today, my father is no longer locked in. He moves...breathes, speaks, has feeding tube removed... Works every day to gain more movement in his paralyzed body. But the work will never be finished, as he says, “I’m living in a broken world and there is holy work to do.””

EMERSON HOSPITAL, MOON BLINDNESS

It was a shock to wake up in the emergency room with Dr. Preston hovering over me again, shining a light into my eyes.

“There she is,” she said. She pulled back, turned off the little light, and smiled in a way that didn't look happy—just like she was trying to soothe me.

“How you feeling?” she said.

Jeannie's head appeared suddenly, around the curtain. “You're okay?”

I squinted at her. She came in and put her arm around my shoulders.

“You were overheated,” said Dr. Preston. “We're rehydrating you,” she gestured to the IV bag hanging beside me from a pole, “and you should be just fine. I'm going to restitch this foot now.” All business, Dr. Preston. She said she'd be back with the sutures. I looked down to see my foot wrapped in a white bandage. Where is

my shoe? I wondered. I laid back down. My head ached, a sharp throb at the center of my forehead. The lights were too bright.

“Okay,” I said.

Jeannie pulled back, and stood with her back against the curtain. Next door, someone was saying his stomach hurt.

“You were trying to cut down the tree,” she said. She looked down at me. I squinted back. “The tree that Mary hit, right?”

I closed my eyes. “I guess so. Stupid, right?”

She shrugged. “Seems kind of desperate, not stupid.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s how I felt when George died. Just too full of sadness. Not that—you know,” she stumbles, “my kitten isn’t like your *sister*.”

I sighed. What could I say? I was humiliated now—cutting down that big tree on the highway? What did the people who drove past think? What did everyone in town think? I was probably losing my mind. First an affair, now the tree—she’s gone off the deep end, they’d say.

“Where’s Amanda?” I said.

“With Danielle.”

“Great. What’s she going to think of all this.”

A man’s voice called in, “Knock, knock?”

Jeannie pulled aside the curtain, and as I opened my eyes, a young man introduced himself as the psychiatry resident, who was here to have a few words with me. He wore round black glasses and his head was shiny-bald.

Have a few words.

Great.

Jeannie nodded. She said, “Good.” She patted my shin. “I’m going to wait outside.”

OBSERVATION

The problem was that I broke down and cried to the doctor, the psychiatric resident, Dr. Watkins, and I told him everything that had happened in the last few years, and everything that had happened this summer, and he determined that I am depressed, and perhaps, he said, “A danger to myself and others,” and I said no, no. “I don’t want to hurt myself,” I said. “I just want all this stuff to get solved.” He nodded. He said, his voice calm, shifting his glasses up his nose, “But the chainsaw. And the axe.” I couldn’t argue with that, and he said Dr. Preston had noted that this was my second visit in a week, and he asked again about how I’d cut my foot, and finally, and I said, “I dropped a pie plate on my foot because my friend thought I was having an affair.” He looked back at me, blank-faced. I wondered how they did it—showing no reaction to whatever I said, the wildest stories they must hear and there they are—blank. I started laughing. “I’m *not* having an affair, though!” I said. He looked down at his pad, made some notes. “And why did you drop the pie plate on your foot?” Oh, god, I thought. “It wasn’t on purpose. It was an accident.” He nodded again. He said, Mm-hm. Finally, I convinced him that I wasn’t a danger to myself or others, that I’d just gone a little overboard, and I promised I would leave the trees, and all state property, alone. I was deemed “sane.” Or sane enough to return to the world. It was suggested

that I follow up with the local psychiatrist, and a therapist, said Dr. Watkins, to talk things through. Sure, sure, I said, of course, yes, and I took the slips of paper they gave me, and stuffed them into my pockets before Jeannie came in and took me home.

REQUIEM

No one ever entirely knew Mary. That's why she was such a mystery to the town, and what made her more beautiful, more desired by the men, more admired by her teachers. She was sweet and kind and smart and good. Always good. But she had this other corner of darkness, and we could not see into it.

To lose someone like that, someone you could not entirely know, whom you always feared would remain elusive, it is a complicated loss.

Mary told me once, just after I'd moved home after school, that she couldn't stay with any of those men because she didn't love them enough. And that, she confided—a *confidence*, I leaned in—she was afraid she may not be able to love anyone enough, ever.

"Maybe I can't do it," she said.

"Mary," I said, "that's nuts. Of course you can. Everyone loves you."

"It's not the same," she said.

Now, it's what I fear when I look at Mary. That I cannot love her enough, cannot love Gerald enough, or Amanda, enough to bring each of them back to me. I know how to push away. I do not know how to hold anyone close. Maybe I have always kept Gerald at a distance, a little. Maybe what Mary did was at least more honest, leaving them with their broken hearts.

A mother says no to the things that would break apart what she loves. If she loves it enough, that's what she does. And here I am. Pushing away a whole family. I want all of them back. I want them all to come back to me.

Ms. Chardell told me stories of unhappy women, women on the lamb. "They were unhappy," she would say, "is all. That's why they ran."

The distance that grew between me and Gerald, the distance from my mother, and Mary truly gone (my longing for her back, my hope and hope and hope for years which has worn me out, I see). The distance from me and my own life.

This is what led me to Tony. I wanted what I did not have, I wanted something immediate and visceral and transportive. I was in the moment entirely with him, and also flying out of it, up into the sky like the blue notes I always longed to be, sailing up and up and up.

Tell me how you're doing, Gerald always said, the first year after the accident, and I would get so angry with him. He stopped trying, after awhile. He wondered if I wasn't marrying him because of my guilt over Mary, or because of something else—some doubt I have, or not loving him enough.

I go to the pond, and there is Dara Singh, rising from the water. It slips off her white dress in rivulets and drops, which fall to the surface of the black pond, in circles.

I am scared of losing my whole past, a better self I knew once, who was happier and more jovial and not scared of anything at all. I am scared that I cannot live up to what everyone said I would be—a wonderful mother and a good translator of poems. It was my fault Mary came to Bolton that day, and so I stopped translating. That was a good punishment.

This is what Dara knows. This is why she haunts me now.

COYOTE.

When Jeannie and I pull into my driveway, we hear the shots, five or six in a row, and then the ringing in the air that comes after, as if the shot's still singing out, traveling to its destination, when in fact they're nestled deep and drawing blood already. This time, the shots are closer—not deep in the woods behind the house, or over in the woods behind Jeannie's, but close—in our yard, maybe. Just beyond the back stone wall, in the woods. I push open the door and hop to the edge of the driveway.

What was the shot? Who had the gun?

“June, your foot,” says Jeannie. “Don't walk on it.”

“Where'd it come from?”

“I'll go look. You go inside.”

Jeannie walks toward the back yard, and I hop behind her. The front door opens, and there's Stella with Amanda on her hip, and Danielle beside her.

“Momma,” says Amanda, excited.

“Keep her inside,” I say to Stella and Danielle. Stella nods, backs in and Danielle says, “Move it, Simon.” The screen door slams, and then they shut the front door hard.

Panic inside me, what I might have caused. Images of Gerald and what might be.

No—it's Ed. Has to be. And where is he? Why is the front yard so empty and still?

Nothing has registered here. The trees are calm, the grass still perfect-dew-dropped.

Jeannie's house looks still. The door is closed, front light on. The sky is gray, streaking pink to sunset just at the fringes, towards the horizon.

"Hello?" I shout. "Hello? Gerald? Hello!"

My voice is a screech. I hear it out of control. I hear Simon inside, barking and jumping

on the door. Danielle comes out the front door alone, and jogs to catch up to us.

We turn the corner of our house, to the side yard—and there he is. Gerald. With the gun hanging down at his side, his hands covered in blood, head hanging. His back is to me. He's wearing an old t-shirt, and there's no blood on it—no blood. Ed is beside him, and there's blood running up one arm. Ed cackles.

"We got him! We sure got him!" Ed says.

"Shit," says Danielle. "What is wrong with you, Ed?"

She runs to the coyote and kneels down beside it, touching its shoulder, looking at its face. "Definitely gone," she says. "Goddamnit."

"Ger!" I limp to him, and put my hands on his shoulders, turn him towards me. His eyes still have their dark flat look, but his face is clean, no blood, no shots. He's okay. He's alive. He's okay. His breath smells like whiskey. He breathes it into my face, and I think of his father, drunk throughout Gerald's childhood, and how in middle school, Gerald was teased for having a drunk father. People saw him at the package store in Stow, or once, swerving into the school lot to pick up Gerald, and a teacher's aid wouldn't let him get in the car. There was a scene, Gerald's father yelling, tottering. Someone called the police and Sargeant Barrone, Michael's father,

came and took Gerald's father away. I went to Gerald then and took his hand and we waited inside together until his aunt came for him and brought us both home.

I shake and shake, just watching Gerald's face, holding both cheeks tight in my hands.

"Ger," I say. "You're okay. You're okay."

I pull back again, and look down to his hands, to the gun pointing at the ground. To the small coyote in the grass, bleeding out. It's not even full grown, a year old, maybe, and its ribs show through its sides. A skinny little animal, probably headed for our trash. Its eyes are open, paws curled together like it's sleeping. Sweet coyote. Dead. It wasn't Gerald who was shot, thank god—but this isn't him, to kill.

I look into his eyes, slip the gun from his hand and lay it down on the grass. He barely moves. His shoulders are still slumped, and I see in his face everything I've done this summer. Everything he's given up for me the last three years, all the support and reassurance and trips to visit Mary and hospital bills paid and mortgages on the house—it's all there. And Mary was wrong. I do want this life with him. I do want him and Amanda. I want other things, too, but I can't give this up.

I take his hands and pull him toward me, then wrap my arms around his back, and pull his head to my shoulder. And he leans forward, resting on my body, and I feel his hands on my lower back, a light hold, and he breathes out slowly, and then he lets out a holler, a wail, some broken cry, and his back heaves as he sobs, leaning into me, at last, needing me again, and the great swath of distance between us is gone, and it's just us now, just us together. I'm not ashamed for wanting this, anymore. I need my translations and my work, but I need this, too. Mary didn't. I do.

MAGDALENE TETRAULT

Her name was Amadine, and she was wild and red-haired. A firefly, her father said, because of how she'd flit in at dusk, never tired at night. Would ask to go back out to see her friends – all boys.

Her mother worried about this one. *This one*, she'd say, as if she was in a row of dolls. But her father indulged her. He asked Victoire to look out for her, to make sure she stayed safe. As her older brother, he said, It's your duty. Can you do that?

Victoire was fourteen.

Yes, he said.

But he had other things on his mind. He was in love with a girl.

Her name was Anna, and she was German, and his family did not approve. She lived in the next town over, her family the only German family in a town full of French. She wore her hair in two long braids twisted up around her head, and she had a funny laugh. That's what Edgar remembered about her. This was sixty-five years later. In the living room, Victoire upstairs reading for the night.

Our father, said Edgar, asked Victoire to look out for her because she was our father's favorite, and because our father thought it would keep Victoire away from Anna. Two birds with one stone.

Of course, it would not work, this plan. Amadine was always working to escape Victoire, to run off on her own to the town, or to the houses of her friends, or to the woods beyond the town, with all those little boys. And at last, after three months of taking care of her, Victoire had had enough. *Eh, bien*, he said, *Allez*. He swatted his hand, and off she ran, with his blessing.

He went to the barber shop to get his haircut, clinking the coins in his pocket with one hand as he walked. He was hoping to see Anna. She had told him, last week when they met in the woods, that she'd come in today to drop some things at the store. Her parents made sausage and dried meats and sold them in the shops. *Alors*, she said, as she turned from him in the dappled woods, *Jusqu'a la prochaine fois*.

And he held those words against his ear all week – until the next time, the words spinning from his ear into his heart. He'd confided in Edgar one night, side by side in their beds upstairs. The same old gray house they still lived in.

But he did not see Anna in town. When he went into the shop, he saw the long strings of sausage and the new pile of beef jerky and knew that he had missed her. He could have cried. Instead, he walked up to the counter and bought a piece of jerky, a coin to Madame Tremblay, and walked home with the meat against his tongue.

One hour later, Amadine's body was brought home. It was a train. Way back in the woods, with the boys, she had been running. Where the train tracks were. And dropping coins onto the tracks to let the train run them over, picking them up warm and bent in their hands when the train had passed. Victoire had given her those coins, not knowing. Three of them. And she had raced for those boys, and those tracks. And she had not pulled back in time, had wanted to make sure it was set just in the center of the track. She had not pulled back in time.

Their father blamed Victoire. For the rest of his life. Would hardly speak to him. At dinnertime, he would not respond if Victoire spoke. Would walk into a room and breeze past Victoire as if he was not there. Their mother would beg her husband to

forgive their son, would ask what was the point of killing them both? But their father needed someplace to put all that anger, all that grief.

So Victoire could never love, said Magdalene.

And Edgar nodded. *Couldn't trust himself.*

He said he tried to convince him, years after it had happened, that you can't live with the dead. That you have to leave it behind after awhile. But Victoire was already forty by then, and had gotten into this habit of his life, of thinking of his life this way, and he wouldn't be convinced that it could be otherwise. He'd gotten into the habit of living on the surface of things, flighty gossip, lighthearted days with all the women – never one in particular that he would let himself fall for. Would focus on the clothes and the routine of the day. Learning to make saddles, the trade their father taught them – which they would abandon for awhile, and then take up again when their father was gone. The weekends spent idling, talking.

Alors.

A way of avoiding.

When Midas turned four and Magdalene woke with her dreams of birds, sleeping more and more to spend time with her husband, Edgar took her down to the river, out of the house, leaving Victoire with Midas, and said, Do you remember the story of Victoire? You remember what I told you?

Magdalene nodded. *You can't live with the dead,* she said.

She was tired. She felt disheveled, halfway between two worlds. The fog, she wrote.

You have to stop, said Edgar. You will lose your whole life this way. You will lose your son. *Comprends?*

He held her arm tight, shook her a little. He was gruff. He had never been this way with her, had always been her laughing uncle.

She looked at him and saw that he was afraid. That he was saving her.

Oui, she said, *Je comprends*.

That night, her husband came again, a swallow, and rested on her hand. And she cried and said goodbye, and then raised her arm fast so that he flew off, dipping and rising into the air, until he was just a dot. And she woke up as soon as he was gone, and went to watch her son sleep.

[Il y avait une fois, her books begins, je connais un oiseau. Il me visitait dans la nuit, avec ses histoires. Mais maintenant, mes rêves sont d'un ciel bleu et clair, des étoiles entours de moi et mon fils.]

The book is dedicated to them, the uncles. Inside the front cover. *Pour Mon Oncle Victoire, qui a protégé mon fils et moi, pendant tout notre ville. Merci. Et pour mon Oncle Edgar, qui a nous enseigner comment rire.*

Who protected me and my son, our whole lives. Thank you. And for my Uncle Edgar, who taught us how to laugh.

[Once upon a time, I knew a bird. He used to visit me in the night, with his stories. But now, my dreams are of a sky blue and clear, the stars all around me and my son.]

* * *

NINE OF US IN THE HOUSE AT NIGHT

It is summertime on the porch, and we are at Aunt Nan's. The fireflies sing along outside, yellow lights buzzing up and down. All of us in a row, there is Tom and Lisa and Jennifer and Laurel and Ninnie and Mark and me. Sleeping bags cocooned tight around us, it is cool at night. I have Strawberry Shortcake on mine. She smiles right in the center of the bag, where my belly is when I lie down. It is pink with red berries and red piping around the edges. I also have stickers that smell like strawberries when you scratch them. We sleep on the porch because it is cool and nice – heads cold, bodies warm – and we can be loud as we like, laughing until way past all the parents have gone to bed and the fireflies blinking in little jars by our heads. We will set them free in the morning. We promise ourselves. They won't die our captives this time.

* * *

AFTER

Gerald and I stood side by side in the kitchen, Amanda at Jeannie's for an hour while we talk this through. The linoleum was cracked in the spot where he'd dropped the hammer last year. Too many renovations, I said then, we should be done by now. We bought this house three years ago, the year of Mary's accident. An old colonial, we said, charming. We knew how much work it needed. We knew how long it would take. We knew we'd be here for awhile, I think, when we bought this house. Knew but

would not say. Built in 1803, says the Historical Society. There are rules we must follow. There is only so much we can do, to maintain the integrity of the place.

We lived with the cracks in the plaster. Lived with the tiny metal sink. Without a dishwasher. With cabinets too small to hold our plates. With the old blue carpet someone must have put down in the living room twenty years ago, stained and splotchy. And then, the second year, once we knew that Mary would be awhile and Amanda was starting to crawl and walk, we began to change things.

“Well,” he said.

He leaned against the counter. He folded his arms. “I didn’t do anything with him,” I said. “Nothing happened. I kissed him once.”

“I know,” he said. “But you won’t lie to me anymore, right?”

I nodded. Then shook my head. “No more.”

“We really screwed this up, hunh?” he said. He chuckled a little.

“Pretty well.”

“This house is too small,” he said. “I hate this house. Are the vents open in the gables? It’s so hot in here.”

He fingered the crack, a white crooked line through the navy blue, a color we chose because it would wear well, we thought. Three hundred dollars and it was cracked within a day. We’d given up then, and stormed out of the house for ice cream, and made love when we got home, sugar on our lips.

“I want to go to New Mexico,” I said.

He walked to the other side of the room, stood by the fireplace – an open floor plan, how we love it, we said when we were planning. There’s the plastic tarp across from him, by the stairs, the room we never finished.

“Terence and I could get that room done in two weeks.”

“Stella can get you classes in New Mexico.”

He walks to the tarp, grabs it, and yanks his hand down fast. The plastic tears from the molding above the doorway. We’re going to put in a molding that’s historically accurate, not this eighties version someone had put in years ago. There’s a lot to do in that room.

“Your mother could come with us,” he says.

I shake my head. “She’ll never leave here. She wants to be near Mary, even if she won’t go see her.”

He looks straight at me, comes close so we’re face to face, and says, “It was her fault, June, not yours. She was the one who got into that car, high on pills, and drove into a tree. It wasn’t your fault. She knew what she was doing. Think about my father, you know? He drank himself to death, and everyone tried to help him. No one could.”

“We should have an intervention or something. I didn’t know how bad it was. I didn’t know about the vet meds, and her friend, the suicide—if I’d known all that—”

“Bullshit,” he says. “It’s bullshit. I watched my father drink for years. *Years*. You know that. And my mother, my uncles, my grandparents—they all tried to stop him. No one could. He didn’t want to stop. He wasn’t ready. He would never be ready. He drank himself to death, and there wasn’t ever a reason for his drinking. He was sad.

He drank. And he couldn't stop. Come on, you know this—I know that you know this. This is on *Mary*, not you. That's what she'd tell you, too. She'd be furious about you giving up your work for her.”

I knew that he was right.

The phone rang. We let it ring.

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WORKERS CLEARED IN THEFT INVESTIGATION

Michael Barrone said in a statement on Tuesday night that the workers at Danielle McNally's orchard have been cleared in the investigation of the Toy Store theft and all other town thefts. Bruce West, Edward Bell, and Mike Tingston have confessed to the break-ins and vandalism. They face sentencing in juvenile court three weeks from today.

*

Bruce's heart is broken, because Carla dumped him. Bruce goes slouched through the center of town. His friends have abandoned him because he confessed. And no one wants to speak to him, and so we share that—both chastised and shamed by our town. Bolton's outsiders.

Now

Every danger starts with wanting—the open mouth, the swift slide down of the thing that burns, hollowing holes in our centers. Saying to ourselves: *I need this*. And then following with all the reasons why. In spite of everything we know, this is *why* this is okay. One justification after another.

This is how my summer began, and ended: the crave, the burn, the ache of remorse. Beginning, middle, end. This is how Mary's life unfolded. This is how my mother and my father blew apart from one another. This is how our family crumbled. All of us wanting what was impossible, now, from Mary and from each other. Knowing, but denying it at every step, a denial so deep that it would be unrecognizable to anyone outside the family—a smooth, streamlined denial made to look like we were just walking towards our goals, when in fact we'd veered so far astray, pushed aside by wanting, by that thick desire, gumming up our guts. And now we're coming free.

*

I see her in the flips of fish at the pond, in the memory of Dara Singh's blue eyes, in my daughter Amanda's eyes, in the streets we played on as children, up and down those hills in the woods, and in the pond. In the black pond, Mary is swimming.

Some things, we cannot stop or change. Some things, they just come.

*

When I call Tony, I keep it short. I say goodbye. I say, I'm sorry. I say, I'm still in love with

Gerald, and we're getting married, finally. At the courthouse. Just before we leave. He says he

already heard. Tony says, Like you said, nothing's secret in this town. He jokes about how I'm

betraying him again, like when we were little. I say, But you never chose me when we were

older, remember? After that day in the woods? Anyway, we say. Anyway. He wishes me well.

It's the end.

*

RAISED ABOVE OUR HEADS

Walking into the woods, it is hot now, summertime, and I know Georgie and John have gone off running somewhere. This is their playtime, afternoons of making fires. Mom knows, too, but she doesn't tell Mrs. McMurphy because Mrs. McMurphy is old and unable to enforce the rules. Mom does it for her, yells at Georgie for starting fires, tells him he could burn down the whole forest, burn down someone's house. These are things my sisters and I already know. Georgie is a city rat, says Mom, so he never learned.

This is the season of mosquitoes, and when we walk along the creek and into the pond and through the woods out back, they buzz and hum around our ears, up our legs, even sometimes on our bums (when we wear dresses or our shorts are loose), and

they bite us all over, leave us itching in our sheets at night. Mom has to witch hazel me because I cannot sleep. The witch hazel takes the itch right out, evaporates it into the air. Mom says, “Watch, you can see it disappear,” and she makes a sound like a shhh, and I watch the itch rise out of my skin, into the dark, like a blue spark, and then flicker away into nothing.

I know Georgie and John are out there somewhere, but I don’t care. I am going to the treehouse, because that’s where I need to be today; I have so much thinking to do. Stella and Mary went off on their way to catch crawfish, and I said, “Not me, I’m going thinking,” because I am almost in fourth grade and sometimes, you have to walk by yourself and be alone, and listen to your own breath inside you. I go up Rattlesnake Hill and think about how glad I am the snakes are all gone, called out like St. Patrick did in Ireland, I bet, some person fluting them away. I listen to the crackle of my feet, stop for a bite of blueberries from the patch to the left, pick up a salamander from under a rotting piece of wood, and then march steady on to the treehouse.

Georgie and John painted a red X on it the summer before to try and scare me away. But I have never been a scaredy cat.

I keep on walking – the crackle of the leaves, the snap of dead twigs – and I hear, to my right, the distant laughter of boys: two boys, Georgie and John, I’m sure. I am wearing my favorite yellow dress with its red flowers. It was a hand-me-down from the Margaret sisters down the street, and I wear it with my white go-go boots which are the best things in the world. They have wide heels and silver buckles that wrap around my calves and they come to just below my knee, covering my chicken pox scar. I stop and listen to the boys laughing. I don’t smell a fire.

I walk to their voices, closer, closer, and then they hear me and turn and shout, “Hey, Junie,” they say, “Nice boots!” They crack up.

“Real funny,” I say.

Georgie’s a secret chicken, can’t make fun of anyone unless he’s with John, who’s a troublemaker. John has twin sisters, identical. He and Gerogie sit like twins on the log, arms crossed, t-shirts streaked with dirt.

“Nice *dress*,” says Georgie.

“It is a nice dress,” I say, “but you wouldn’t know.”

They laugh when I say that.

“Hey, Junie,” says John, “show us your titties.”

I look at those two, crouched on a fallen log, side by side, their legs scratched from playing in the woods all day.

“I don’t *have* titties,” I say. “Duh.”

John says, “Yeah, you do. All girls have titties. Even my sisters.”

I look at him, and I look at Georgie, who is looking down at his shoes because it’s too much for him, tittie-talk.

“I do not,” I say.

I don’t want titties yet. I’m only in fourth grade. I don’t want all that. I want my dresses and my boots and my good friends, but no titties. When they come, you have to spend all your time putting on bras and sitting in the bathroom. Susanna’s older sister with the red hair told us so. I have more important things to do.

“Fine,” I say, “I’ll show you.”

I walk closer to them, and I reach down, grab the bottom of my dress and raise it up above my head so I can't see anything – just the sun shining through the yellow cloth, and I shout, “See? No titties, stupid!”

John laughs when I lower my dress, pointing at me.

“I see London, I see France,” he says. “You're flat as a board!”

He holds his stomach and rolls backward off the log, like I gave him a laugh attack. He crashes into the leaves.

Georgie's still sitting there with his head lowered, hands beside him on the log. “You didn't have to,” he says. “You shouldn't have done that.”

I put my hands on my hips. This is what Ms. Aaronsen at school calls sassing, which is why she'll give a spanking.

“I don't care,” I say. “Doesn't bother me a bit,” and then I turn in my go-go boots and I stomp back to the path, crunching down so hard on those leaves, and I breathe in and out, in and out, and I walk faster and faster. But the faster I walk and the harder I try not to care, the worse it gets. I don't know why, but something feels wrong – like they tricked me after all – and I run for the treehouse. I climb up the ladder fast, boots slip-sliding on the wooden rungs that are dry as old bones, deer carcasses we find picked clean by wolves summers ago.

I get to the top and step over the red-painted X, and then, I let the catch in my throat free, and I sit in that treehouse, and for no reason I could explain to you right then, I cry just the littlest bit. I run my hands over my chest, over my whole body, and then I stand up in my yellow dress and my white boots, and I stomp up and down on the tree house, over and over, jumping, waving my arms, shaking my shoulders back

and forth like I've seen women do on TV and shaking my hands around me, all of it just to show the world I don't care, just to show how much I love what I'm made of, and I watch the shame those boys gave me rise out of me into the air and flicker away, just like the itch and sting of a witch-hazeled bite.

* * *

DR. SMALLS

I explain it all to Mary. I say that I'll still see her every week, a few times a week, at least, if not every day. I say that a nursing home isn't always so bad, that we'll make new friends there, like Marianne and Amelia and Baxter. It will be all right, I tell her. We'll all still be here with you. She stares at me, through me, into me. Does she know? I lean my head against her bent knees. Her legs are so thin.

"I'm so sorry," I say.

I lay there for a long while, and when I look up again, her eyes are closed, and her chest rises and falls, and she's sleeping.

"See you soon," I say. I stand, and pull myself away—as if pushing against a tide, I force myself to keep going—out of her room, red poppy chair and the tree bending outside, down that long hall I know so well, past every doorway of friends, past the nurses' station, I look at no one, I don't answer anyone's hello's. If I stop, I might fail. Stomach curling into a fist, I force myself out the sliding doors, into the car, then home, where Gerald and Amanda wait.

We're declaring bankruptcy. The house will be put on the market, at a loss. Next week, we leave for New Mexico, to stay with Stella and Merle. Gerald has two classes at the university, and he'll be an academic advisor. It's not his dream, but it's a start. Stella and Merle will help with Amanda, and I'll have time to translate again. That was part of the bargain, Stella insisted.

Will I like it in the desert? Will our mother be okay? Danielle promises to take care of her. I tell Gerald I have to drive, so that I have something to focus on as we leave Bolton. Maybe I'll feel relieved as we go. Maybe I'll be exhilarated. At last, we will venture off again, in search of something new—the dreams we have, the life we need—solvency, creation, family. These are our only hopes, our greatest hopes, vast sparkling skies ahead.

* * *

SHINING SHINING

My sister Stella, the youngest of us all, has such long fingers that Ms. Chardell loves her, says she was born for the piano. The thing is that Stella is tone deaf, and Ms. Chardell says that's a problem, too, but don't worry, Stella Dear, you can just memorize the notes. Stella whispers to me on the way back from her lessons, looking back to see if Ms. Chardell can hear even though we are hundreds of feet away, "I hate to memorize the notes. It isn't any fun. I want to *hear* them. Can you?" she says.

“Yes,” I say. “But I don’t have your piano fingers. And Ms. Chardell thinks I have no rhythm. That’s why she’s always making me count along with the metronome.”

“Mary can do everything,” says Stella.

She’s the prettiest one, we both know. Stella’s got those funny long hands. I have my gangly-wangly legs that never do anything right, and my round blue glasses that I *have* to wear, says Mom, because last year when I stopped for a week, I ran into things and got all bruised and then when the nurse asked me if I was getting abused, I said yes, just to see what would happen. It became a Really Big Deal, and Mom and Dad had to go to so many meetings, and Mary and Stella, too, and all of us had to see a head doctor (is what Dad called him) and then, I got grounded, which started to feel like child abuse, and finally, when the whole thing was over and Mom and Dad could “relax again,” they said, “Junie, you go one day without those glasses, you’re grounded again. Understood?” And then they talked to me for weeks about what it means to lie, and do I know what *consequences* means? Sure, I said, it means you learn a lesson. Close enough, they said.

Stella holds my hand the whole way home from piano lessons, just like she’s a tiny little girl again, because she hates Ms. Chardell and is afraid of her, the way some people are afraid of ghosts or monsters under their beds. Ms. Chardell is that kind of person – gray-haired and gray-eyed and a little spooky. Some of the kids at school say she’s got bodies buried in her walls, and a live cat, too, that scrapes and meows in the night. They say you can hear it when you walk by. I told Dad about that one time and he said, “Someone’s been reading too much Poe.”

“I don’t want to go back,” says Stella. “Next time, can we keep walking past her

house, into town, and Mom will never know?”

“No, Stell,” I say, “You have to go.”

“She can still have Mary.”

“Maybe,” I say.

Mary has long black hair. Stella is blonde and I am mouse-brown. Mary is like a raven, says Mom, a dark-haired beauty. Dad’s family is blonde and Mom’s is brunette or black. Mary looks like Mom’s side. I look like a lighter version of Mom’s side.

The thing about our sister is, she can dance ballet and play piano and read the hardest books and sing the best and even do double-dutch jumprope – and she’s nice about it, too. Never rubs it in our faces like Alexadra Pease or Dixie Willman do at school. Dad says Mary is a Jack of All Trades. He even calls her Jack sometimes, as a joke.

Mom tells me and Stella how great we are, too, how I tell good stories and how Stella is a real spitfire, and how we are all beautiful.

Everyone is beautiful, sure, to their Mom. She told us that herself. But some people, like Mary, they just shine and shine and shine, like the closest stars to the world, the shooting ones that streak across the sky in their brilliant way. Dad says those stars are dying out when they do that, but I don’t think so. I think they are living wild, pushing their way into the next galaxy, so far away that even we can’t see.

That’s what Mary is. She’s one of those brilliant streakers; everything in her is made

to shine up the sky, puts all the regular stars to twinkling shame. She burns so hard in this world that she's slipping into another one, brilliant brilliant shining all the way.

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NOTES ON THE NOVEL:

1. Rabbi Ronnie Cahana’s story is told by his daughter, Kitra, in this TED Talk on September 2014:
https://www.ted.com/talks/kitra_cahana_my_father_locked_in_his_body_but_soaring_free?language=en
and on his website: <http://www.rabbicahana.com/>
2. “Names for unconscious states” and pamphlet for families of patients with TBI excerpts are taken from the following:
file:///Users/RachelMay/Downloads/severe_brain_injury_booklet.pdf
http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/clinical_trials/index_all.htm#Coma
<http://www.biausa.org/brain-injury-diagnosis.htm>
3. Carrie Rodriguez told the story of Kirby the turtle in the *Kirkland Reporter*
<http://www.kirklandreporter.com/news/228252341.html>

4. The effects of sevoflurane are described by Donald G. Barceloux here:
<http://books.google.com/books?id=9JLiJcjdqkcC&pg=PA659&lpg=PA659&dq=veterinary,+sevoflurane+abuse&source=bl&ots=JREnHz-cjS&sig=exvi91kMb8s50jpQf-8G1wxqqak&hl=en&sa=X&ei=arhgVKKVLIW4oQSkriKgBA&ved=0CFYQ6AEwCA#v=onepage&q=veterinary%2C%20sevoflurane%20abuse&f=false>
5. Lacie Lowry reported on the Oklahoma drug theft of \$50,000, on News 6
<http://www.newson6.com/story/19151992/woman-accused-of-stealing-over-50000-worth-of-drugs-from-catoosa-vet-clinic>
6. “Caregiver Burnout”: <http://www.traumaticbraininjury.net/residential-rehab/>
7. Course of treatment for moderate/severe TBI:
<http://icahn.mssm.edu/research/centers/brain-injury-research-center-of-mount-sinai/resources/faq/treatment>
8. Morgan O’Rourke reported on suicide risk in veterinarians here: “High Suicide Risk for British Veterinarians,” March 29, 2010, citing expert Dr. David Bartram. <http://www.riskmanagementmonitor.com/high-suicide-risk-for-british-veterinarians/>

