

Sympathy Pain

Jolie is up, so I'm up.

There's just enough blue morning light through the window that I can see the reflection of my head in the toilet water. I don't like starting my day this way, but Jolie's father won't let us live together yet (although, holy roller that he is, he absolutely insists on us having the baby!), not until I've shown that I'll stick around, and I don't want her to feel like she's in this alone. Anyway, we're only a couple of days from the ultrasound, and then the second trimester, when the books say the morning sickness ebbs.

I barely get my fingers out of my throat before spewing last night's dinner: chocolate creme Fungos and strawberry milk. Jolie would have you believe that her diet's gone this way because of the pregnancy, but she's always eaten this crap, ever since we were kids. Even in the half-light I can see that the Fungos have hardly broken down at all. The floating bits still look shiny, fresh out of their vacuum seal. It can't be good for the baby, food that's impervious to stomach acids. I text Jolie saying as much. She responds almost immediately.

Her: go where the fun-gos!

Me: I'm serious, babe. Bad news, this junk.

Her: respect my cravings, respect my authority

I snap and send a photo of the mess in the toilet, writing beneath it: *Respect? I worship you.* This time she takes a while responding. I watch the typing ellipses fade in and out on the screen. Somewhere I figure there has to be a file cloud full of the things people have almost said to each other. If there is, Jolie's folder is busting at the seams. It's ironic because it's this very

aspect of her personality -- not knowing what to say in the moment -- that makes her prefer texting in the first place.

She finally sends, *i love you*

I ease off my knees and flush the toilet. When she says that lately, it feels like a pat on the head, something meant simply to calm me rather than assert her true feelings. Aren't couples supposed to share everything? The screen brightens again.

now im starving

I text back a smiley face, and then emojis of a pizza slice, a cupcake, and a turkey leg. I say, *Can I bring you anything?*

u have work, she says. those people arent going to save themselves.

What I want to say now is: *It's not like that. Saves is really a misnomer for what I do. There's no actual saving going on. The ones who are going to jump, jump, and the ones who aren't, don't. Most of the time you can tell by their vitals.*

All that is true, but that's not why I want to tell her. I want her to be impressed by my expertise, taken with me the way she was three years ago, when I was a junior and she was a freshman. Sometimes, what I wouldn't give to be living that life again.

Can I come over later?

More ellipses.

I mean, if it's okay with your dad?

The next minute passes like a gallstone. All I want is to raise this child together.

i have a paper to write

For summer school? Then I add quickly, I'll be quiet.

door has to stay open, she says. dad's orders

Fine by me.

ok

When I roll into the jumpers annex, Oakley and Harris are taking turns trying to throw playing cards into a garbage can. I'm late, but neither of them says anything about it. Probably because, 1) summer is our slowest time of year, and 2) they both know better than to fuck with a soon-to-be father. Even so, I feel a little guilty, and so pick up all the errantly thrown cards once they're through the whole deck.

"Who won?" I say.

Oakley looks at Harris, then at me. It's a look like I just asked for his social.

"Spoken like a true teenager," Oakley says, stretching his arms high over his head. "All about the score."

Harris throws his head back and laughs, way too loud. He's only a few years older than me, but likes pulling seniority whenever he can. Probably because my save stats are better than his. "I'm twenty in a month," I say, but nobody seems to hear me. I grab a ginger ale from the mini fridge -- no caffeine during pregnancy, upshot is the ale settles my stomach -- and sit in the recliner to take in the view. Between us and Rensselaer, the Hudson is hazy with July heat, and over the train station I see one of our drones, banking slowly like a vulture over some dying thing. I look at the screens and try to find its POV, but with a couple dozen going it's hard to keep my eyes fixed.

We haven't had a jumper up in weeks. Apparently, it's slow everywhere. We've even taken on some of New York and Boston's traffic so their guys could take vacation days. If I'd known how boring the crisis center could get, I might have stayed in school.

"Well alright," Oakley says. "If you simply must know, I won. Homeboy here couldn't hit water from a fucking boat."

Harris opens his mouth for a comeback, but swallows it instead. You can see Oakley wants to reestablish rank.

"You beat me by a couple," Harris says.

"A couple?" Oakley chuckles. "Oh, boy."

Oakley's old school. He's been on the crisis circuit since the days of dial tone and landlines. He's probably seen and heard more people die than I've met living. I can't tell if his sense of humor exists because of or in spite of this fact. Either way, he's a good man to work for.

"I need a shower," he says, scratching at his beard, which is gray around his chin but otherwise black. "You boys gonna play nice?"

Harris and I nod. Oakley pulls a fresh towel from the closet and heads through the main office towards the locker room. For the few seconds that the glass doors are open, the chatter from the rest of the police station floods in. I hear snippets like "first degree" and "mitigating" and I have two thoughts: 1) At least our gig is better than that, and 2) How could I want to bring a child into this world?

I don't hate anybody. I like to think that hate has no place in me. But Harris inspires whatever comes closest. His thing is, he's all about status. Once, he tried to pass a jumper off to me cause he could tell the guy was for sure gonna go through with it. He didn't want his save

percentage to drop. My thing is: people are in trouble and we need to help them. I remember every jumper I've lost. I could tell you their names, but going back over that information is bad for morale.

We spend the next half hour finding ways to not speak to each other. Harris flips through old issues of *Sports Illustrated* (in an attempt to impress and/or identify with Oakley, he won't get on board with the paperless thing) and for a little while I take over the manual controls of one of our raven series. I cruise around the capitol district and then over by Clinton High in Troy, where Jolie will be a senior in the fall. These joy rides always become little nostalgia trips for me. I've relived every bit of my life through the drone POVs. Lately, I've had to resist the temptation to go look in on Jolie at home. Couples need trust.

I'm swooping low over the outfield at Bruno Stadium when the screen bank expands the POV of an eagle series. Harris and I look at each other like there's some fault to be found in the situation -- that's how out of practice we are! -- and then scramble to get the earpieces in and stand in front of our Gram-Cams. Mine picks up first, which pisses Harris off. I smile a little, but make sure to have a straight face as the Gram-Cam runs its laser over me and comes online. My image uploads in about five seconds, and there I am, standing in the sky.

Our man is in the warehouse district, up on top of one of the old smokestacks. This is a popular spot for jumpers. Nobody's ever there. For a while we didn't even patrol this area, out of the way as it is. But with how big the drone fleet has gotten, all the new models, it was just a matter of time.

The display shows me that Victor Eddy is 47 years old, 5'9", with a current heart rate of 140 BPM and a blood pressure of 150/90. I scroll down and see he's a history PhD who's been

out of work nearly two years. A tasteless joke about him making himself history flashes through my mind. Grow up, I tell myself.

He's got his toes over the edge and is holding tight with both hands to one side of the ladder supports. Sweat has soaked his tee shirt and the top of his khakis. I can see his nipples, big and pink like quarter-sized slices of salami. The sweat could just be from the climb, the heat, but I take it as a good sign anyhow. His glasses slip down his nose, and he takes great care to push them back up while maintaining his balance. Another good sign, I think. He's not serious about this. All I have to do is get this guy's feet back on the rungs, and his conscience will do the rest.

"Hi, Victor," I say. It's always good to use their names.

He glances at me, mouths a hello. From where he's looking, I'm appearing in full color and high-def 3D. However, if he were to get any sort of angle, he'd see how beyond razor thin the image is. From my side, I can see the back of the gram -- fuzzy but not without shape, like opening your eyes underwater -- and the faint red green and blue stream feeding from the drone's projector. It's funny, being able to watch yourself work.

"You are Victor Eddy, of 1334 Kenmare Drive?"

He nods.

"My name is Derek," I say. "It's good to know you."

After loading some more background, the display shows he's got no wife, no children, and that his mother died six months ago. The think-of-your-family angle is out. I check out the live street view of 1334 Kenmare: it's a split level on the Rensselaer side of the river, chipped paint and overgrown lawn. I believe in the idea that it's never just one thing that makes people

want to end it, it's a slow accumulation, a puzzle coming together. Victor's is starting to make sense to me.

"Victor," I say. "You don't want to do this."

I start with my hands in a prayer position, then move them onto my chest, over my heart. Body language goes a long way in these situations.

"I'm fine," he says.

He squeezes his eyes shut and mutters a few words to himself, probably trying to psyche himself up for the leap. Another good sign.

"Your life is a puzzle, Victor, and you don't like any of the pieces. Change one, and soon you'll change the whole thing."

"Stop using my name," he says. "This is what I want."

"I'm only trying to help," I say.

He's shaking all over. Slowly, he loosens his left hand from around the ladder support and gives me the finger.

"I've had problems since before you were born."

"It's okay that you're angry," I say. "It's part of being human."

"So is dying," he says.

I must be really rusty, because the next tactic I try is completely amateur hour.

"Victor, could you do me a favor?" I say. "My shift ends in a few minutes. If I work past ten I get double time pay. Could you wait a few minutes?"

An old trick Oakley taught me when I first started. Gets them outside their own experience, thinking of others. In the meantime, the medics and the rest of the cavalry can get

there. But it really is for beginners, and I hear Harris actually scoff behind me when I uncork it. It takes everything I have not to turn around, not to disengage Victor, but I make a mental note to kick Harris' ass later. Victor looks me right in the eyes.

“I know what you're doing,” he says.

“I have a baby on the way,” I say. I've used that one before too but this is the first time it's true.

“Congratulations,” he says. “You're going to lose me.”

I'll admit, I do feel a little overmatched. But I decide to use it, not to fight the tide. It's this very flexibility that makes me good at my job.

“How high up are we, Victor?” I say.

He hesitates. Then, almost in a whisper, “I don't know.”

The drone takes a quick measurement and tells me it's 194 feet to the ground. I decide to embellish.

“Two hundred and forty-seven feet, Victor. Almost a football field between you and the ground. Have you ever seen what happens to a body on impact from this height?”

I can tell he hasn't even considered this aspect of the jump, the total demolition of his physical self, were he to go ahead with this. And it scares him, this flash view into his own potential future.

“You'd think it was rigged with explosives,” I say. “A lot of the time, the medics don't even find all the pieces.”

“Pieces,” he echoes.

And yeah, I think, this all comes apart if you want it to. We're all joints and hydraulics, finally. Unhinge, unscrew, deflate; observe collapse. Right now, the opposite of that is happening inside Jolie.

"I fucked this up with pills two days ago," he says. "I fell asleep on my side, covered my pillow in vomit."

"You were meant to keep living," I say. "Please, Victor, climb down."

Slowly, I move my right hand out of the Gram-Cam's field of view and, in the direction of Harris, make a motion like I've just stroked a jumper. I don't like gloating, stooping to his level, but I can't resist the moment.

"Do what you want, Victor. You're a smart man. You know this won't solve anything. You'll just be making a mess for someone else to clean up."

My first year, a woman named Jennifer Delton fell from the Times Union Center because she was reaching out to touch me, the hologram of me. My concentration lapsed and I reached back. She died, and she no longer wanted to. That moment is always playing out somewhere in my mind.

Right outside the fence at the end of the access road, I see an ambulance and a couple of cruisers. One of the officers crackles in my earpiece, saying they're waiting for my say so to take over. I avoid that whenever I can. The last thing these people need is to feel threatened, although Victor will be arrested for trespassing once this is over.

"Are you going to jump, Victor?"

In my periphery, I see Oakley stroll back in. The washed smell of him fills the room, followed by the warm scent of bagels. I'm glad he's here for this. It's never a bad thing to remind the people in charge of your competence.

I focus on the screen, Victor. He's still got his toes over the edge, but I feel as though I've built a twenty foot wall around him. His heart rate's climbed even higher, up to 160, and now I'm thinking I'll be lucky if he doesn't go into cardiac arrest.

"Here's what I want you to do, Victor. First, I want you to move your feet back from the edge. Can you do that for me?"

This is where the Gram-Cam shines as an innovation. I mime the motion for him to see, and watch the warbly version of myself take tiny steps in place, like I'm learning a dance. Victor follows.

"Now I want you to take a few deep breaths."

I puff and deflate my chest like a cartoon rooster. Hold, two, three, four, and release. Victor follows.

"Great, Victor. Now take your right hand and grab the other side of that support. We're gonna get you home."

"Home," Victor says, reaching blindly for the support behind him. His knuckles go white as soon as he grips it.

I glance off screen. Oakley's standing over Harris with the bag of bagels in one hand and a cardboard tray of coffees in the other. When I look back, all I can see is the top of Victor's bald head catching sunlight as he descends the ladder.

"You've done a wise thing," I say.

I wait a few seconds to make sure he doesn't come back up, and when I feel confident that the job's done I tell the Gram-Cam to end the transmission. As soon as the projector image fades, the drone about faces and sets a course towards the college. When I'm sure Victor can no longer hear me, I address the cruiser cops.

"Copy, officer?"

"Copy," I hear back.

"Perp's all yours."

Victor turns out to be the high point of the day. I spend the rest of it cruising low over the Hudson -- seeing how big a wake I can create -- or lifting weights, and the few check-in texts I send to Jolie (*How's your day? Back hurt at all? Thinking about you.*) get only one response (*why dont high school students get maternity leave*). To which I say, *You're the one who wanted to graduate early.*

I'm anxious to go see her. Especially considering the triple I'm pulling from midnight tonight til Sunday, when we go for the ultrasound, which is an even bigger deal than it sounds like. Jolie's father, Theo, is actually letting us go without him.

At seven I'm a ghost. As if the boredom wasn't bad enough, I had to hear Harris' ass kissing all day about how much harder the job was when Oakley started, that modern telecommunication has taken all the skill out of crisis counseling. I know he's only on that beat because of how I dealt with Victor, but even knowing that, I can't keep what he said from eating at me. Oakley, to his credit, didn't confirm any of it.

On the way up to Colonie, I pick up a variety pack of Fungos (chocolate, banana, cherry) and extra pulpy OJ, which Jolie now likes to drink right after brushing her teeth (I don't do this one with her, the taste is truly awful). Pulling onto her block, I get the same feeling I got on summer days when we first started seeing each other: hoping I'd be seen arriving by neighbors, and having them know what Jolie and I were getting up to while her dad was at work. The feeling seems to enter and leave me at once, like a taste you recognize but can't identify.

Theo is tending his rose garden when I walk through the gate. He's kept them going as a memorial ever since her mom died seven years ago. That was the year Jolie wore nothing but black, and hardly said a word to anybody, which must have freaked her fifth grade teacher out. I know, in addition to his faith, there are some emotional mathematics happening inside Theo that are contributing to why he wants us to have this baby -- a desire to see Jolie's mom reincarnated, maybe -- but honestly, I'm grateful for anything that gets him even a little bit on my side. In his right mind, he hates me for getting near his baby girl. When he spots me, he raises his right hand like he's taking an oath, then goes immediately back to watering. He's gotten a couple of fines for doing this before, exceeding his monthly water allotment (they installed the automatic sprinklers for a reason!), but he's made it clear: in that way he simply doesn't give a shit.

Upstairs, I see Jolie's door is open, and there's steam thinning near the ceiling outside the bathroom. I start to get hard as soon as the smell of her shampoo hits me, and just knowing she's fresh out of the shower and naked inside that room makes me giddy, expectant of something wild. The door creaks when I push on it, and then it's Jolie's voice, telling me to wait a minute.

"I'm naked!" she says. "I'm fat."

"That's crazy," I say. "You haven't even begun to show yet."

At any rate, she doesn't let me come in til she's donned sweat pants and an XL ValleyCats hoodie. Theo played some shortstop for them back in the day, and still gets free merchandise. We kiss -- just a little peck -- and then like she said, she's got her paper to work on. The door stays open. Without much to do but wait for her to finish, I sit in the window seat and eat a few Fungos while the evening settles over her block. I watch the light on the houses and trees soften. After a half hour or so, when the sun is visible way at the end of McCaskill Ave, everything glows this heavenly orange for about a minute, and then dims as the sun sets. I love sunsets. I know it's a cliché, but they're an irreplaceable sort of thing; nothing can supplant their effect. This is the only time Jolie looks up from her work, and we watch it happen together. Can two people really, truly share experience?

It means pretty in French, her name. And it suits her. Jolie is a couple of genetic variations away from being classically beautiful, but that would ruin the whole thing. She knows this about herself, how close she is to being perfect looking, and that knowledge is the source of her strength. Strength she'll need, come these next six months, these next eighteen years. I'm not bad looking, but I hope to God, or whoever, that this kid gets Jolie's eyes (green in summer, hazel in winter), hair (chestnut), and nose (one nostril slightly larger than the other, the imperfection to end all imperfections), and that I can fill in with whatever spare parts are needed.

The streetlights are on by the time Jolie finishes her work. I check the time -- nearly eight-thirty already -- and feel a little resentful that I have to go back to the office later. Jolie stands, stretches, and unwraps a Fungo. She sits opposite me on the window seat and wolfs it down. She sticks her feet under my ass. Her toes are always cold.

"What's the paper about?" I say.

“Open assignment. Something to get our imaginations going.”

I ask if she knows what she’s writing about yet, looking hard at her stomach. She folds her hands over it and tells me she’s not sure.

“Sounds like fun,” I say.

She raises one eyebrow (another thing I hope kiddo gets!). I’m sure she wants to say something to do with me not thinking anything about school was fun, but she won’t because she doesn’t want to hurt my feelings. In another couple of years they’ll probably be able to show real, giant ellipses over peoples’ heads.

“Hey,” I say, “when are we gonna get married?” I try to sound like I’m kidding. “Just come downtown one of these days during lunch. We’ll get it done at city hall.”

“Get it done?” she says. “We can’t even have that conversation until I’m eighteen.”

“That’s not how the state of New York sees it,” I say.

She sighs, all pissed off, and pulls her feet away from me.

“Oh come on,” I say. “I’m just trying to make you smile.”

She pulls on a pair of thick socks and slippers. The tininess of her frame is exaggerated by all the bulky clothing she’s wearing. I can’t help but worry a little at how she’ll carry a pregnancy.

“We won’t even know if this baby’s healthy til Sunday.” She bends over, hangs her head towards the floor and wrangles her hair into a ponytail. “I don’t want us to get ahead of ourselves.”

I'm not gonna lie, this hurts. However she means it, it hurts. I mean, we're already ahead of ourselves. Ideally, I wouldn't have wanted a kid for another ten years, but I'm embracing the complications of our reality. We might not get another chance at something like this.

"The baby's going to be healthy," I say. "You might have to start eating some greens and grains at some point, but this baby's gonna be fine."

"It's not the baby I'm worried about."

Just then, a drone appears at the end of the block. It's an old clunker, a first generation eagle (which are now callously called pigeons around the station). Someone must be flying it because it's doing a super slow scan, drifting for a few seconds in front of every house, every yard. In nice neighborhoods like this, you can count on a few of these sweeps each day. Jolie doesn't like the surveillance, but like I always tell her, research shows that it makes people feel safe.

"Sure," she says, "the people who haven't done anything. And anyway what good is *feeling safe*?"

I'm tempted to chalk some of her attitude up to hormones, her body going through unimaginable changes, but I keep my mouth shut. I move over to her side of the window seat and sidle up next to her so she's closer to the window and I've got one ass cheek on the cushion. I put my arm around her shoulder, and it just doesn't fit like it used to. She's got her knees pulled to her chest and her head resting on her arms, all folded in on herself. The dumb part of me worries that the baby's getting crushed.

"If you're worried I'm going to leave you, you shouldn't," I say. "I'm in for the long haul. I'm excited for Sunday."

“I know you are,” she says. “I know you won’t.”

It’s only now that I notice the house is dark. Except for the kitchen light, which sends a soft, peripheral glow to the top of the stairs, everything is shadows and relief. The scent of rosemary plays in my nose, I hear Theo humming along to an oldies station. The drone, going door to door, looks like some poor animal, its scanning beam like a snout searching for scraps of food, or affection. I actually have a moment where I feel bad for it.

“I want to feel what you feel,” I say. I slide my hand down from Jolie’s shoulder and around her waist, all the way to her stomach, where I think the baby might be. I get underneath her shirt, and put my palm flush against her skin.

“Too early for that,” she says.

The drone drifts up to the window, and briefly floods the room with white light. We both turn our heads away, and I imagine Oakley or Harris on the other side of the lens, doing this just to mess with me.

“Jo-jo,” Theo says from downstairs. “Dinner in five.”

I’m watching Jolie’s face as the drone lowers its light, pivots, and flies off. I’ve still got my hand on her stomach. “He wants it to be just us tonight,” she says.

I kiss her on her forehead, near the part in her hair. “Til Sunday.”

Downstairs, I poke my head in the kitchen to say goodbye to Theo. His glasses are fogged from the steam of whatever he’s cooking. “You good?” he says. “Work good?” He looks blind with those fogged glasses. He pushes them up onto his forehead and wipes his hands on a dish towel. “You ready for Sunday?” What he really means is, are you ready for every day after

that? Are you ready to raise my grandchild? Are you going to correct this mistake you've made by acting right?

"I can't wait," I say.

He gives me another wave, and turns back to the stove. Open on the table side by side are a cookbook and his bible. "Don't get mixed up," I say. "Chicken a la Deuteronomy." He gives a polite chuckle. Our relationship wasn't always like this, so courteous. Way back, when he thought Jolie and I were like brother and sister, he was warm, welcoming. I think he would have been happy to keep me as that kind of son.

I walk around the block before getting back in the car. My legs are cramped from squeezing onto the window seat, and it feels good to stretch them. On the sidewalk, where the shade from the oak trees fell all day, the air has stayed cool, and I stroll slowly, dipping my hand in and out of the lukewarm air in people's yards. I look back up at Jolie's window every few steps, hoping to see her watch me go. I'm never more lonely than right after I leave her room. Part of me still has about a thousand hooks sunk deep in our past, along with a notion that if I follow the threads I can get back to those times. The truth is, I don't like this phase we're in, or rather, this vestibule between phases. I'd fast forward through the next twenty-some odd weeks if I could, get us married and into some house in the countryside, or up near Lake George. Much as I love this street, that house, there's just no way Jolie and I can start our life this way. We need some space of our own. That's all we need.

The triple is an unmitigated bummer of a shift. It rains all night and day, and since I was the counselor who initiated with Victor, I have to appear in his court proceeding via satellite to

confirm that yes, he was indeed trespassing on state property, and watch the poor bastard get hauled off in handcuffs. Thankfully, there are no more jumpers, and I'm on mental autopilot until Sunday morning. All the while, I'm checking in on Jolie, trying to be up and down when she is. I don't make myself puke when she does, because nobody around the station needs to be dealing with that, and I don't feel like taking any more razzing from Harris about my womanly functions.

I do finally get a chance to beat his ass, albeit on the racquetball courts. I channel all my bored energy into our games, and get over on him 21-10, 21-13. He grinds out the third game, getting us tied at 19 before running out of steam. When it's over I stay on the court, hitting volleys to myself, breathing hard.

The rain breaks on Sunday. It stays cool and dry, which is rare during the summer. Driving to Jolie's, I feel reenergized, like maybe there's a good omen to be drawn from the meteorological shift. Jolie bites her nails the whole way to the clinic, and when she finishes with the nails, she goes to work on her cuticles.

"Won't be able to do that soon," I say.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"The vitamins they give you make your nails harder. I read about it in one of the books."

"I'm on the vitamins already," she says. "They haven't changed anything."

It's just us and one other couple at the clinic, and although we arrived after them, we're given a room first. It's a small space, made even smaller by the ultrasound machine, which looks something like a butler robot, with a tray for serving meals. Jolie sits back in the examination chair and I poke around the literature, skimming the pages of *Are You Ready to be A Parent?* and

Sterility is Not The End! I examine the ultrasound machine. It's damn near twentieth century technology. If Jolie were on my insurance -- if we were married -- we could go somewhere better, somewhere with 3D holograms like we have at work, but I don't want to stir up that argument now. I'm engrossed in a testimonial from *Vasectomies and You* when Jolie says, "You don't listen to me."

I turn. Her face is pond-still, no wrinkles of expression. Her eyes are fixed on some spot on the ceiling panels.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not ready for this," she says.

I pull a stool close to the table and take one of her hands in mine. She sits up and pulls it away, folds in on herself like she was on the window seat the other night. I was looking forward to this day.

"We're in this together," I say. "You're the last person who should be uncomfortable."

"You and my father are in this together. And I am uncomfortable. I am really, really uncomfortable." She stands up. She wants to pace the room but it's only a few steps across. She can't get anywhere without brushing against me.

"Me and Theo?" I say.

"This isn't the way to keep me," she says. "It's unfair for you to want this."

Unfair. There's a lot I could say to her about that word. I watch people jump off bridges and smokestacks and turn themselves into pink and red chunks on the ground. They bail, leave everything behind, and here I am, here *we* are, sticking with life, and she wants to use the word unfair.

“We’re being fair to the baby,” I say.

The doc comes in right at this moment. His name tag says Treanor, and he’s all nervous energy, clearly wants to get this done and go home. I don’t have the balls to ask him for a minute, so we wait quietly while he gets the robot going and turns off the lights. We are lit purely from the blue glow of the monitor, you can see the bone structures of all our faces. Doc asks Jolie to sit back and lift her shirt. I stand next to the chair and put a hand on her shoulder. There’s this impulse I have to look the part, even now. Treanor squirts clear goo on her stomach and spreads it around with the probe. The monitor stays dark for a few seconds, then slowly, as if the probe itself were just becoming able to see, shapes begin to form. At first it just looks like a grainy satellite image, some landscape seen from space. It’s only when I hear the heartbeat that I’m sure about what I’m looking at. It – our child – is curled in the same position Jolie’s been taking lately, and the sound of the heartbeat is simply thunderous, like depth charges filling the little room. I never imagined it could be so loud.

“160 beats per minute,” Treanor says. “Very good.”

I think I catch Jolie smiling. It could just be a trick of the dim light, but still.

“Nose, mouth, feet,” Doc says, pointing with each word.

“Are they mine or hers?” I joke.

“No way to know yet,” Doc says, all business. He punches buttons on the robot. “I’ll take some stills so you folks can show your families.”

I watch him work. Despite his demeanor, he’s got a soft touch with Jolie, and guides the probe around her stomach as though he’s shaping something out of clay, or trying to convey

nonverbal messages to the baby, saying, to little Annie or Charlie or Sebastian or Grace: it's alright out here, you will be loved.

"How big is it?" Jolie says.

Treanor holds his thumb and forefinger a few inches apart, "Like that."

"Hardly anything," Jolie says, then looks at me. She tightens her lips and her eyes widen and shine with tears. Was this all she needed: to see it?

I whisper, "We're going to make the best of this."

Doc turns the screen so that only he has a view to it, then lingers on a couple of spots either side of Jolie's navel. It occurs to me that her bellybutton will likely pop out at some point, hang from her like a small blind worm. There's no way I can mimic that.

"Everything looks good," Doc says. He narrows his eyes and leans towards the screen, then sits back. "Anybody want to know the gender?"

And I think: yes, absolutely. Let me start getting to know this kid right this very instant. I start to answer, but Jolie squeezes my arm. Her fingers are cold through my shirt. She looks back and forth between me and Doc.

"I want to wait," she says. "Please."

"Can I find out?" I say. I'm not sure who I'm asking.

Doc offers to give us a minute. Off goes the monitor, on come the lights. All of us squint. He hands Jolie a box of tissues, and is out of the room before she's done wiping the goo off. She rolls her shirt back down and sits upright in the chair.

"It'll help me if we don't find out yet. I won't feel so rushed." She takes my hands in hers and brings them to her chest. "This is important to me."

“We’re in this together, that goes both ways,” I say. “I mean, I’d really like to know.”

She begins to cry. Her crying face hasn’t changed in fifteen years, and I feel a jagged-rimmed hole open up in me for causing this. She folds her hands over her face. “Never mind,” I say. “Whatever you want.”

I stand, nestle my nose in her hair and take a deep breath. The smell of her fills me up and arouses me, same as the other day. Her hand finds the back of my neck, and she holds me there. And for a second, it’s like, the hell with our trouble. Her trepidations, the pressure from Theo, the possibility of not getting to be with her, it all goes away. That was the definition of *us* on the screen, nobody else, the best things from me and her. It feels, briefly, like we’re exactly where we want to be.

Unfortunately, the feeling doesn’t last. Once we leave the clinic, it’s back to reality. We spend the rest of the day fighting, and on Monday I bring all that negative energy into work. I feel like Oakley and Harris can sense it on me, because they don’t say more than two words to me the whole day. We get a jumper up on the Kosciusko Bridge, and I let Harris handle it. I don’t even taunt him for needing to have her apprehended. I don’t hear from Jolie.

On Tuesday, it’s me who’s gun shy with the texts. I almost send about a dozen, but it all sounds the same: sincere but inadequate (*I’m so sorry...I love you more than anything...We can get through this*). By the late afternoon I’m stir crazy, and impulse wins out over my better judgment. As soon as I’m alone (Harris challenges Oakley to a game of racquetball), I commandeer one of the newest model drones – a falcon series that can camouflage itself – and head up the river towards Jolie’s house. This one’s about a third the size of the oldest models,

and handles beautifully. Just for fun I dart between cars on 87 and do a couple of barrel rolls low over the pavement. Its display accounts for everything all at once in real time: elevation, humidity, temperature, IDing everyone within a thirty yard radius, and measuring their vitals. I think of our baby, his/her heartbeat, the only thing that matters right now.

I rein it way back when I get to McCaskill, and creep just above the trees. The display seems to work even faster now, as if in reaction to how slow I'm going. It picks up Jolie and Theo through the leaves, and I navigate into the dense mass, engaging the camouflage. They're in the yard, her walking lazy circles, him watering his rose garden. I see her mouth moving. I could easily focus the audio radar and listen to what she's saying, but that's not why I came. This is already a breach of trust. I just want to make sure she's alright.

She sits down on the front steps, takes her phone out and taps the screen with her thumbs. My pocket buzzes. If I take my hands off the controls for more than a few seconds, the drone will disengage from me and resume its randomized flight pattern. I hold it steady with my left hand and slide the phone out with my right.

hi

Hey love.

This is a first, and a bizarre one. I have never once watched anybody from a drone POV while simultaneously communicating otherwise. It gets even stranger when she calls.

“Can you come over later?” she says, before I've even said hello.

“Of course,” I say. “What can I bring you? Need more strawberry milk?”

I zoom in on her. Too quick, it turns out. The camera has trouble keeping the image crisp, and while it's adjusting she's all pixelated, her face and hair a boxy color field of browns and flesh tones.

"I don't need anything," she says. "Just come over so we can talk."

"I'm sorry about the other day," I say. "I'm only trying to help."

She tells me she knows, that she's sorry too, and it's then that the image finds its resolution. Her face, in all its complex detail, fills the screen. It's a crystal clear picture. I can damn near count the freckles on and around her nose, and she looks better than she has in weeks. Happy. Unbothered. Maybe it's the pregnancy hormones playing with her skin, giving her a glow. Maybe she's made peace with our situation, and all she needed was a couple of days. It's quiet: ellipses over both our heads. She stands, walks up and down the steps, sits again. The silence is straight out of adolescence. It goes on and on, neither of us knowing what to say, neither wanting to admit to it. It's terrifying, but it floods me with sensations from a few years ago, before anything good or bad happened between us. I get lost in the feeling, so lost that I momentarily forget where I am, that between me and the rest of the station there are only glass doors, and that when I turn in my chair, Oakley or Harris or anybody who is so inclined could be looking in at me, watching this whole thing.

What Killed Bruce Lee, Jr.

For a very reasonable rate, Ricky Stubbs will let you taste his gun. Fifty cents for anything under two minutes, two dollars for five, five for ten, and after that I'm not sure. I only lasted about a minute. That was all I needed.

The idea is that when the hard times inevitably find you, be they financial, personal, professional or otherwise, you put that barrel in your mouth, supervised by Ricky himself, blanks in the cylinder, and you think hard whether this is something you want for yourself, for the people you'd leave behind. You taste that gun bluing, feel the steel on your teeth, maybe your jaw gets a little stiff from staying open, and all the while you're in this quiet, dark room. The blanks, as Ricky will remind you, can do some serious damage, despite their name and reputation. "There's the wad," he says, "the muzzle blast. No bullet, but at close range it's still a hell of a discharge." He's right on the other side of the door should anything happen. If there's any earthly experience closer to death, I haven't found it.

Where does Ricky get off providing such a service? Well, he's been left behind by just about everyone he's ever known. His father, his mother, both his brothers, at least two cousins, and his wife. Several of them used this very same gun. So he's on a mission of sorts. I suppose it's an odd way to get his point across, definitely on the macabre side, but you just have to remember that despite the grim approach he's in the life saving business. In that part of the world -- Jacksonville, Vermont -- he's regarded as something of a saint. He's even legally protected. A lawyer he helped out was so grateful that he drew up a contract exempting Ricky from any responsibility should a party kill or harm him or herself during a visit. Ricky keeps copies of it on a clipboard outside the room.

My visit to Ricky came about five years ago, when I was under the impression that I'd lost everything. I was underwater on my house and that pressure translated into pressure on my marriage, which ended. I had a two day affair when Kathy was out of town. I met the girl on a Friday night, at a bar in East Dover. I chalked the first night up to drinking, a pure mistake of judgment, but when I let her stay a second night I knew it was something else. What gave us away was: the girl, a redhead, took a bath and I forgot to clean the tub. When Kathy saw the alien hairs in the drain, she pulled them out and laid them on her pillow. They were next to me all night as I slept. Then, I guess, she left, quick and quiet. She didn't take any of her clothes. I tried calling her all morning, but all I heard was a message telling me the number had been disconnected. I made piles of her clothes on the floor, sorted them first by color, then by size, then by personal recollection: when I remembered seeing each item first. I put the piles outside the house. The neighbors gave me looks through their windows. I mixed them up, made one giant pile, and laid on it. I stuffed everything into garbage bags, filling sixteen in all, and lined them up on the curb. Garbage collection wasn't until the morning. I watched the bags all night to make sure nobody stole them.

After a few days, I sought out Ricky, by which I mean I parked myself on a stool at Dot's diner and waited for him to show. Around ten-thirty he sauntered in: a newspaper rolled and tucked under his arm, a trucker hat low over his eyes. He's a gaunt, gangly sort, a bunch of sticks joined by rubber bands. I don't know if he could feel the desperation pouring off me that morning but he sat right next to me and nodded a hello. I didn't say anything. He unrolled his paper. A few minutes went by.

"Thought I might see you here," he said. "Word around town is Kathy left."

“That’s right,” I said.

“You don’t have kids,” he said, pretty sure but fishing for confirmation.

“No -- we didn’t get to that.”

“No kids,” he said. “Well then I’m not sure what you’ll do.”

A plate of sunny side up eggs and bacon arrived before him. That nod had carried his usual order as well.

“I’ll eat,” he said, “then we’ll go.”

To stay afloat, Ricky leased out his farmland. That day I remember seeing a dozen or so horses chasing each other around the rolling green; their whinnying was the sound I searched for once I was in the dark room. But all I could hear was my own breathing. That dark, the smallness of my lungs working, it stood in direct contrast to the deed in question. I saw imbalanced scales, death outweighing life by an enormous, immeasurable margin, a distance that could never be made up. Ricky told me I was only in there forty-seven seconds, but it might as well have been a week. No way, I told him. Not me. I was going to make some changes.

“Well that’s what we’re after here,” he said.

We, I thought. Does he mean himself and God?

I handed him the gun, a revolver with an ivory white handle. Quite a beautiful object, actually. If you could separate it from its purpose, it would just be something nice to look at.

“.44 Magnum with blanks,” Ricky said. “This is what killed Bruce Lee, Jr.”

He tipped the cylinder out and let the bullets drop into his hand. They clinked like loose change, he shoved them in his pocket like loose change, I paid him in loose change, which went

in the same pocket as the blanks. He reached the gun around his back and shoved it barrel first into his waistband.

“There was no Bruce Lee, Jr.,” I said. “His name was Brandon.”

Ricky squeezed his eyebrows together then shrugged. I think what he meant was: people forget the dead. “You’re shaking,” he said.

“Is that normal?”

That’s when he started laughing. “Normal?” he said. “Where’d you get a word like that?”

I left town a few weeks after that. The next year would bring together many elements of the life I have now, including a master’s degree and the woman who became my second wife. I could tell you things are perfect and you could call me a liar, but I am undeniably happy. The only thing that bothers me is when Susan asks me what I miss most about where I used to live, I have to make something up. I can’t say the taste of Ricky Stubbs’ revolver.

August

Elena Mason woke up sweating and dry-mouthed. She'd taken two Vicodin and drunk three or four martinis the night before. The amount was as usual, and it had never made her feel like this. She pushed her blankets off and phoned down to the front desk. It was picked up before the second ring.

“Good morning, Mrs. Mason.”

This was the new doorman, a boy of about eighteen. “Miss,” she said. She asked him why it was so hot.

“Central AC broke in the middle of the night,” he said. He spoke with a mild accent she couldn't identify. Middle was meedle. “Upper floors are heating up,” he said.

“I know that.” She lived in 11E.

“They're working on it,” he said. “Should be fixed soon.” Feexed. He hesitated before adding, “Can I do anything for you?”

She weighed the offer. This was just something people said. If only you meant that, she thought. If only you weren't just being polite. If only the right people asked that question.

“No,” she said. “Thank you.”

She hung up and opened her eyes fully for the first time since waking up. Velvet curtains kept the room dark, and the border of the wallpaper, depicting grapevines, slowly became visible. Sunlight brimmed around the edges of the curtains, and she figured the cool, foggy spell that had been sitting over the city all week was over. She heard a jackhammer cutting through concrete. It could have been happening directly below her window, or far away down Park Avenue. It was August. New York was empty.

She sat up and tentatively put weight on her feet. Earlier in the summer, she'd had surgery on both to repair joint damage brought on by arthritis. The surgery -- metatarsal fusion -- had been called a success by her doctor, but she considered that a poor choice of words, given her difficulty walking all summer. It had become easier recently, although she believed that was more to do with her getting used to a constant of pain -- as people tended to do -- rather than the pain actually ebbing. The feet themselves still didn't look right: she only glanced but saw the lines where the stitches had been along the bones of each of her toes, the skin white and tender like a child's. Using the bed for support, she stood and limped to the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator door and stood in the cold, dry air. Stacked two high and three across on the highest shelf were meals prepared by Rita, her housekeeper, stored in tupperware and ready to be microwaved. She looked at the containers packed tight with rice and vegetables and slow-roasted pork, and she wanted to be hungry, but the idea of chewing and swallowing, over and over, made her nauseous. Her stomach felt scraped out, her blood heavy. She didn't want to do anything.

Her cell phone rang. It stopped by the time she got to it in the living room, and as she picked up the phone it trilled with a voicemail. It was Tess, her sister, asking if they could meet at noon instead of one. "Shit," Elena said. She'd forgotten. This was the day Tess wanted to have brunch, or anyway, wanted to meet for brunch so -- Elena was sure -- they could talk about Amy, their niece, who was in Bar Harbor with the rest of the family. It was already quarter past eleven. Elena called Tess. It rang out and went to voicemail. She called again. Again, no answer. She began to type out a text, but without her glasses couldn't tell what the tiny letters spelled out. She felt dizzy. Her big toes hurt. She sat on the couch and leaned back.

Amy. The only daughter of PJ, Tess and Elena's older brother, the only boy, who had died, how long ago now? Was it really seventeen years? Amy was ten when it happened. A helicopter crash during a ski vacation. Elena hadn't wanted her to suffer anymore than was necessary. Using her own earned wealth, not the family's, she'd set up a trust fund to pay for Amy's high school and college education. Amy had graduated late from both -- one year for high school, two for college -- and had yet to work a job. Now she lived off the fund, and found the bottom of it, it seemed, every couple of months. In this way, she was just like her father. Elena had tolerated and even enabled the behavior for a while, allowing that young people needed time to find a purpose or direction, but three years without a job was enough. Two months ago, for the first time, Elena had refused to replenish the fund. Girl had to learn. Tess, the baby of the family, everyone's favorite, including Amy, didn't think that was fair. Today was inevitable.

Elena checked the time on her phone. 11:30. Before leaving the house, she had to shower, put on makeup, fix her hair, and get dressed, all while hindered by her limp. She would be late.

Tess had picked a bistro on 74th Street between Fifth and Madison. Elena knew the place. She'd entertained clients from the bank there. It was only ten blocks and one and a half avenues from her apartment, but she took a cab. She'd chosen a pearl white dress and a matching headband. She wore rectangular sunglasses with rounded corners. And on her feet, yellow flip flops. When she stepped out of the cab, she saw her reflection in the glass doors of the restaurant. She'd worn the flip flops to keep her feet from hurting, but she couldn't get past how off they looked with the rest of her outfit. Her sister wasn't the type to notice an anomaly like this, but Elena couldn't help fixating on it. It just didn't look right.

Inside, she removed her sunglasses and put on her eyeglasses. She saw Tess at a small oval table by the window. Elena watched her sip from a Bloody Mary and chew absently on the celery stalk. It was 12:30. Elena wondered many drinks she'd had. She got all the way to the table before Tess saw her, at which point she stood and made to help Elena sit.

"It's alright," Elena said. "I'm fine."

Tess kept a hand on her sister until she was seated. She said, "Are you in pain?"

"I'm fine," Elena said. "I overslept."

The waiter came over. He set down a bread basket between them. He was young, clean shaven with curly black hair, cut neatly on the sides. He recited the specials, flourishing the air as though the dishes were floating there in front of him.

"Ice water and a vodka martini," Elena said. "I'm not hungry."

Tess ordered eggs Benedict and another Bloody Mary. Once the waiter was gone, she told Elena they'd missed her in Maine.

"Mom especially," she said. "You're the only one who wakes up as early as she does."

Elena had not gone because of her feet. But she knew her mother had felt some relief over her absence, fearful as she was of the friction between Elena and Tess. There was another sister, Pamela, who was there with her husband and three boys. Elena and Tess were the ones without children, without husbands.

"Not anymore," Elena said. "These pain pills throw off my sleep. I have funny dreams. Not funny, weird. Dreams of dreams."

She removed her sunglasses and dabbed away sweat with her napkin. She put her hand on the table, and, feeling the cool of the marble, slid her hand forward so her wrist touched it. She

wished she were alone so she could lay her cheek on the cool table. There was a group of high schoolers at another table, five of them. Other than that, the place was empty. The teenagers laughed and were drinking mimosas and would linger, Elena was sure, all day. She wondered where their parents were.

“What happens in the dreams?”

Elena hadn't seen her sister in nearly a year. What the hell did she care about her dreams?

“I fall,” Elena said.

Tess scratched her head and looked out the window. She wore black tights and a long, sleeveless shirt, also black. Her frizzy hair was wild in the humidity. At the end of the street, a construction crew was digging into the pavement, sending occasional clouds of dust wafting down the block. The sisters watched one pass and settle.

“You're back early,” Elena said. She meant from Maine.

“Work,” Tess said. “I've got nothing but work till Thanksgiving.”

“Is that right,” Elena said. Tess owned and operated a small printing press. Business had never exactly been booming.

“It's these galleries,” Tess said. “You know how I do artist catalogs? They have everything one way for months and months, then at the last second they want to change it all.” She paused. “You should be grateful you don't work with creative types.”

Elena didn't like having her time wasted. “Why don't you ask me about Amy?” she said.

Tess looked out the window again, sucked through her straw at the watery bottom of her drink. Elena hated how evasive she could be.

“Ask,” she said.

“She wants to go to law school.”

Elena laughed: one clear *Ha* that for a moment silenced the other table and the wait staff, who were huddled around the podium at the front door.

“Please,” Elena said. “Miss sixth-year senior, miss everybody’s-wrong-but-me, miss just-like-her-father? My money is not a sandbox for her to play in.”

“Environmental law, Elena. It’s all she’s talked about this summer.”

The waiter arrived, placing down the martini and the ice water and the Bloody Mary. He managed to do this without leaning his torso over the table. Elena enjoyed watching him move. “Your food will be right out,” he said to Tess, before turning his back.

“She’s never played with your money,” Tess said. “That’s not fair.”

“When are application deadlines?” Elena said. “April? If she’s serious about this in April, she can have the money. I don’t know why you’re asking me now.”

Tess drew vertical lines in the condensation on her glass. She went all the way around the glass drawing lines, till there was a small moat of water around the base of it.

“She’d have to take the LSAT in September,” Tess said. “No -- I mean December, December at the latest. She wants to know the money is hers before she begins the process. It’d make her feel safer.”

“Safer?” Elena repeated.

“More secure, you know.”

Tess bit half an olive off the toothpick in her Bloody Mary and chewed it slowly. She called the waiter over and ordered that another drink be made; there was too much Tabasco in the one she had. The baby, Elena thought. Always the baby. When the waiter came back out, he had

the new drink and her food. Elena watched the poached yolks shake under hollandaise as he set the plate down. She still wasn't hungry.

“She’s doing so much better,” Tess said. “She’s applying for paralegal work in the city, and working in the meantime at an animal shelter in New Rochelle. I mean, full time. I know she’s been a real queen in the past, placed blame everywhere else, but she’s really taking responsibility for herself now.”

Elena waited until Tess had the first bite in her mouth before saying, “I know exactly how she’s doing. I don’t need your dispatches.”

Tess chewed the mouthful, swallowed, wiped at the corners of her mouth. “Amy says you haven’t spoken in months.”

Elena leaned over to sip from her glass, which was full to the brim. When the level had dropped enough, she lifted the martini and sipped some more, holding aside the small metal saber which had on it two olives and a pearl onion. She thought she might throw the rest of the drink in her sister’s face. Send her back downtown smelling of vermouth, and maybe the saber stuck somewhere in the fat of her upper arm.

“Amy just needs a little more from you,” Tess said.

A little more, Elena thought. It was always a little more: an incremental, brash kind of greed. There was a sneakiness to it she didn’t like. She loved her niece. After PJ died, she’d wanted to take on a bigger role in her life, but Amy had never made herself available to it. Like her father, like everyone, she gravitated towards Tess.

“I set up that trust because her mother is a mess and always has been, and because I wanted her to feel loved after PJ did what he did. It is not her birthright.” Elena now drank from

the ice water, and rolled the glass across her forehead after she'd swallowed. "I've taken care of that girl," she said. "How she ended up loving you best, I'll never know."

Tess had a forkful of food, but stopped eating. The plate in front of her was about a foot square, the eggs Benedict a small mound in the very middle of it. There was another, smaller plate, on which there were four long steak fries she hadn't touched yet. Small portions, big plates. Tess hated places like this, Elena knew.

"Stop saying that about PJ," Tess said.

Elena rolled her eyes. They'd been through this before.

"We weren't there, Elena. Any of us. We can't know what happened."

There had been an investigation, a case built against PJ, a dead man. Officially, the helicopter crash was ruled a misadventure and the case was dismissed. Unofficially, there was evidence of tampering, gas lines cut. Their father, Paul, Sr. had settled with the claimants -- six in all, the families of the also-deceased -- for an untold amount.

"It was the Alps," Tess said. "High altitude. Those things can happen up there. And PJ would never have done that, something that could hurt other people."

"Kill," Elena said. "It killed them."

As if from nowhere, the waiter appeared, and asked if everything was to their satisfaction. Elena asked for another chair so she could put her feet up. He nodded and got her one from an adjacent table, pivoting it on a back leg across the checkered floor.

Elena thanked him and put up one foot then, carefully, the other. She saw Tess looking at them. "They get achey," she said. "It helps to elevate."

"He came away clean," Tess said. "They investigated."

“You think Dad paid those people for nothing?” Elena said. “Helicopters don’t just drop from the sky. Grow up.”

Elena reached for her martini. With her feet up, it was more of an effort, and she felt her abdominal muscles tense and quiver. Atrophy, she thought. Everything has atrophied. She sat back and held the glass with both hands, taking her time before drinking the last of it. She looked out at the street, at the vacant scene of a New York street in August, at once placid and violent. In the warped, passing reflection of a black town car she caught a glimpse of herself and Tess in the restaurant, the way they looked to someone from outside. Cocktails between them, her feet up, a late Sunday brunch. Who would imagine anything was wrong?

“I can’t take care of her,” Tess said. “Do you forget what it’s like to need help?”

“I never asked for help,” Elena said. “You’re asking me to allocate considerable resources towards someone who has proven she is not yet capable of being responsible with them, and who may yet have a manic episode. Imagine you were me. What would you say?”

“We’re not talking about PJ,” Tess said. “We’re talking about Amy. Amy needs your help.”

“We *are* talking about PJ,” Elena said. “He was not well and she is his daughter and these things are most certainly hereditary.”

Elena drained the rest of her martini and chased it with water. Drips of condensation fell from the glass and darkened on her dress.

“I’ll tell you what else,” she said, feeling loose from the liquor. “She’s twenty-eight now, same age PJ was when he had his first episode, so she really has to look out. Do you remember that first time, when he undressed at Dad’s Christmas party?”

“Twenty-nine,” Tess said, almost whispering. “She’s twenty-nine.”

“Well there you go,” Elena said. “She’s overdue.”

Tess poked at her food with her fork, first the eggs, then the steak fries. Both had gotten cold. The hollandaise sauce had a skin. She lifted her napkin from her lap and dropped it across what remained of the meal.

The sisters were quiet. At the other table, the teenagers toasted to something and laughed raucously. Three boys, two girls, Elena saw. In some part of herself, she was jealous of them, though she’d mostly learned not to envy anyone. The jackhammer down the street chattered, and another waft of dust drifted past the window, gray like a breath on a cold day. Elena was tired, wanted to get back in bed, back home where hopefully they’d fixed the air conditioning. She motioned for the check, not even looking for the waiter. The leather folder was placed in front of her seconds later. “On me,” she said. She placed a one hundred dollar bill in the plastic slip and held the folder out. The waiter plucked it from her hand and she told him to keep the change. He thanked her, wedged the folder in the drawstring of his apron, and cleared the plates and glasses from the table. Elena took off her eyeglasses and put her sunglasses back on. Tess was again looking at her feet.

“Don’t they look ridiculous in those?” Elena said, meaning the flip flops.

“Yes,” Tess said. “They do look ridiculous.”

It was then that Tess cradled Elena’s right foot, brought it to her lap, and pressed her fork into the soft skin between the bones of the second and third toes. She did it calmly, so calmly that Elena didn’t think to pull her foot away, not until Tess had the fork tines dug in, functioning like a horse’s bit. Elena couldn’t see her foot. Tess held it below the table, out of sight. Elena believed

she felt the tines pressing in harder, maybe blood being drawn, but she couldn't be sure. Her imagination had a way of running wild when provoked.

“Tess,” she said, not knowing what else to say. She repeated her sister's name, hoping Tess might hear some meaning or history in it, a reason to stop doing what she was doing. All the while Tess kept her eyes down, studying what was in her hands, as though trying to memorize it. Finally she spoke, or rather, Elena believed she heard her speak. She might have imagined it for her own relief. “Just shut up for a while,” was what she heard.

Elena scanned the restaurant. She could scream if she wanted to, sound an alarm about what was happening, but then what? How would she explain this? And what was to be done? Maybe if she just waited, this would end on its own, and later, it would all seem like some waking fever dream, an anomaly, forgotten as soon as it ended. She focused on other things, what surrounded them: the jackhammering outside, the smell of espresso from behind the bar, the way the sidewalk pavement, when struck at certain angles by the sun, glittered like a diamond. She breathed.

The Manor Lawns

I'd nodded off in the Tyners' yard, the very same yard in which Lucas, their only son and a classmate of mine, had killed himself. Under a clear black night sky, he'd lit himself on fire and burned. I watched him do it from my bedroom. We lived at the top of the hill, a long catty corner angle from the Tyners. You could run a zip line from my window to the spot where he died. I hadn't told anyone about what I'd seen, I think because I hadn't processed it. There was a police investigation which confirmed his actions, but that didn't settle anything in my memory. I couldn't recall it, the step by step process enacted by a person I used to know. I knew it had happened. I understood it as I understood language, or felt hunger. It was something that seemed to have been with me all along, if only because I couldn't accept it as new information.

The remaining physical evidence of his deed was the scorched patch of grass where the gasoline had pooled, surrounded by smaller burns from the incidental drips. It looked like an as yet undiscovered country with an archipelago abutting it, and the grass grew in thin and half-yellowed. No matter how many times I mowed over their surrounding edges I couldn't do anything to correct the disparity. Really, the Tyners should have re-sodded the whole thing, but as near as I can figure, people who endure tragedy like that have a tendency to insist on the old way of doing things, at least for a while. It's as if they believe performing the same rituals they practiced before their trauma will persuade time to fold back on itself and reset everything. It's a fool's errand, but you can't talk them out of it. Not that you'd try.

I opened my eyes and there was a woman above me, her blonde hair glowing in the late sun, which was about to disappear behind the bay, and was reflected in a wide orange strip along

the water. The smell of her came down to me, Coppertone and something fruity, like plums. It was Mrs. Tyner, Lucas's mother, Nina.

“Anthony?” she said. “Darling?”

Before Lucas died, Mrs. Tyner had been one of the more visible residents of Douglas Manor, someone who during the week taught first grade at PS 98, and on the weekend showed her face at the club, playing tennis and cooling off afterwards with a whiskey sour. But over the past few months nobody had seen much of her. She'd been on indefinite leave from the school, and was becoming someone whose appearance in the aisles of the A&P constituted a worthwhile conversation. Someone about whom, if she did not soon reappear, ready to schmooze and gossip by the bar, people would start to ask, whatever happened? We'd been sleeping together a month and a half, since the beginning of June. Usually I went inside to her, but on this evening, after cutting the grass, I'd waited for her signal -- four taps on her bedroom window -- the one that told me neither her husband nor the housekeeper was there, but it didn't come, and eventually, I'd decided to lie down. I didn't know how long I'd been out.

“Hi, Nina,” I said.

The Tyners' house was at the foot of the hill on MacDougal Road, and the yard sloped sharply before leveling out. If you cross sectioned this part of the manor, it would look something like a hockey stick. Mrs. Tyner wobbled on the slanted ground, and I knew right away she was drunk, and I told her so, my eyes narrow against the fading light.

“You're drunk,” I said.

“Stoned,” she responded. It was unclear if she was correcting me altogether or amending what I'd said. I began to get up, and she put the ball of her foot on my chest. She pressed a little.

“Here,” she said. “Let’s do it here.” She was wearing an airy white blouse and blue and white seersucker shorts cut well above her knees. With her foot on my chest I could see the inner edge of the underpants she had on. Pink. Even the glimpse of them sparked in me an excitement, an anticipation in my body I’d learned to trust. She and I would soon be naked, exposed to each other. It was going to happen. All of me knew this.

“Someone will see,” I said.

“I don’t care.”

“Nina,” I said. “You’re not thinking.”

It had never been my intention to go to bed with her, but one day it had happened, and every fourth day after that, when I came back to mow their lawn, it happened again. Her husband was in Manhattan all day for work and into the evenings. And on Saturdays, which this was, he sailed up Long Island Sound, often not returning until the next morning. I never told anybody this: Mrs. Tyner was my first lover. She was married, I was seventeen, and she was the mother of a dead classmate, someone who I’d once been close to. That summer I was acting on a prolonged impulse, capitalizing on a weakness, or vacancy, and I should have known better. It’s easy to say that sort of thing after the fact, but that doesn’t change the truth of it.

“Let’s go inside,” I said. “It’s hot out here.”

“There’s those hedges,” she said, waving a hand towards the street. “Those fucking hedges Richard insisted on planting. We can do it sidled right up next to them, and nobody will see.”

“It’s too hot,” I said. “I’ve been outside all day.”

This was the summer I mowed the manor lawns. I used Father's old push reel, a beautiful machine. Pure function. When the wheels rolled, the cylinder rotated. It worked like a pair of scissors, cutting the grass cleanly, without splitting the blades, and the only maintenance it required was a sharpening and oiling every couple of weeks. Because I didn't need to fill it with gas, I charged less than the local landscaping companies, and for that summer, I actually had a monopoly on the neighborhood.

I waited for Mrs. Tyner to respond, but her eyes were fixed on the hedges, or anyway, she was looking in that direction. She could have been looking at Father's mower, which was standing upright at the edge of the yard, or at the houses of her neighbors across the street, who, she was sure, had a lot to say about her, about how she'd managed to royally screw up her only son -- but what the hell did they know? -- or at the dried out patches a few feet from the mower, where Lucas had doused himself in gasoline and burned to death, or past all that, to the far end of Little Neck Bay, where it let out into the East River, and where the red lights of the Throgs Neck Bridge had begun to wink. The truth is, I don't know, because I didn't ask, because I didn't want to know. I understood what we were about. We were diligent and focused lovers. There was urgency in the physical relationship we'd honed, and we were little if anything more than that physicality, although from time to time she would try to make it into something else. We'd be lying side by side in her bed, still warm from each other, and she'd offer to make me dinner. Or, she'd complain about how distant Richard, her husband, had become, or that she wanted to return to teaching at the school but the administration wouldn't let her. I'd say no to dinner, listen to her complaints, and then I'd get dressed and leave. I didn't understand much about sex, but I

could see how it opened people up and let out all their troubles, and I had a sense that this, what we were doing, had to remain basic, or else we'd both be lost forever.

I moved her foot off me. I'd sweated through my t-shirt, and the spot where her foot had been resting stuck to my skin. I tugged at the fabric and stood up to watch what remained of the sunset.

"Too hot," she repeated, as if she didn't believe it.

The bay was at high tide and littered with boats. Somewhere in the maze of white masts and sterns was the schooner Father had purchased for our family two years before. The idea then had been that we would all go out together, the four of us, all the time. He had even started sailing lessons for me. But soon thereafter my younger sister Carly emerged as a junior tennis star, and I began seeing less of everyone. There were always tournaments, camps, practice sessions late at night and early in the morning out at the Port Washington academy, and Father even decided to shell out for some media training with a private consultant, just in case Carly attracted anything more than regional attention. The three of them -- Father, Mother, Carly -- had been gone most of the summer for a series of tournaments across the midwest, and for weeks I'd been the only one in our house. It was nice, sometimes, to be alone, to not be reminded of my relative plainness as a progeny, but other times, I saw the empty house as a hint about my future, an early harbinger of how Mother and Father would forget me, or anyway, the particulars of me. I would always be the first child, the original, but I couldn't help suspecting there was a displacement underway, a shift I could do nothing about. Maybe that could explain what I did that summer, I mean, getting laid by Mrs. Tyner twice a week, but I've never been sure.

I took Mrs. Tyner by the elbow and turned her towards the house. She moved as if in water, basically obeying my influence but with some resistance, a lag. She nearly tipped one way, then the other. I'd seen her drink before, knew she was a lightweight, but I'd never seen her lose any control. "What did you take?" I said. She didn't respond, although a soft noise emanated from her. She was humming a tune I didn't recognize. "Is this going to turn into some kind of emergency?" I said. I was holding her right arm, the one she swung her racket with, and the muscle above the elbow, though out of practice, grew taut between my fingers.

"There's no emergency," she said, raising her voice. "And there's no reason to worry, and it's not your job to worry about me so don't bother. And I can walk just goddamn fine."

She pulled her arm away, teetered, and righted herself. The only noise reaching us was the occasional sputter of outboard motors on the bay. Otherwise it was quiet, and Mrs. Tyner's brief loudness sounded like a violence to the air. I followed a step behind her, ready to catch her if she fell, and in the reflection of her living room's bay window, I watched us approach the house. It was that time of day when, if you're inside, you can either turn the lights on or go a little longer without. In New York they're called blue nights, and it's true: for about six minutes the whole sky briefly occupies the same spot on the electromagnetic spectrum, a flat indigo. From time to time, I still see the image of us approaching her house, two blue shadows, although now, in my recollection, I make myself younger than I was. Before correcting the memory, I see a ten or eleven-year-old boy following Mrs. Tyner, and I suppose that's a function of not wanting to take responsibility for my actions during that period. But also, it's to do with certain relationship dynamics being set for life, no matter what happens. I was a head taller than Mrs. Tyner that summer, but once upon a time, she'd stood at the front of my first grade classroom,

and with her arms spread wide and her lesson written in large, curvy handwriting on the chalkboard, she seemed enormous, as though she could tell me everything. I should probably say this: Lucas was in that class too. He sat to my left.

With a push then a pull, Mrs. Tyner let us in to the kitchen through the screen door. Inside, the air conditioning was on full blast and goose bumps rose on my skin. She set about turning lights on. Once my eyes adjusted, I saw on the counter a sweaty, mostly empty tumbler, and a transparent orange prescription bottle. The bottle was mostly full, so I didn't figure an overdose was likely. Still, she was impaired, loopy. She'd had to feel along the walls for the light switches, and now, standing in her brightened living room, her condition showed in her eyes. They were bloodshot and glazed and the look coming from them was simply absent. It was as if she were gazing at something a few feet away that nobody else could see. I knew how to touch her, but that wouldn't do much good right now. I scrambled through my mind for something to say.

"Vicodin," she said, flicking her wrist at the counter. "Richard got the prescription after his shoulder surgery, but he never took them."

"And you drank too?" I said, although I knew the answer.

She put a hand to her forehead, as if to steady her thinking. "Yes," she said.

She wobbled again, and I moved quickly to her before she had a chance to fall and hurt herself. I stuck my arms under hers and clasped my hands behind her back, just above her tailbone. Her arms rested on my shoulders, and she let them slide down until her wrists were linked around my neck. We stood there, looking very much the way two people who are in love might, only we weren't gazing into each other's eyes, wanting to be there and nowhere else,

speculating about this moment stretching into eternity. She was messed up and I was tending to her, and there was no question at all as to whether this was the way things were supposed to be.

“I thought --” she said, losing the train momentarily. “I read somewhere that painkillers make sex better. I thought we’d both take some. It would be something new.” She closed her eyes tight, the way a child anticipating something scary does, and rested her cheek on my chest. I felt the rest of her weight shift onto me.

“I’m going to put you in bed,” I said.

“This is embarrassing,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright,” I said. “We’ve just got to get you lying down.” I knelt and got my left arm behind her knees. “Keep your eyes closed.” I scooped her up and held her still a moment so the motion wouldn’t make her sick. She was always small in my arms, but felt especially so in light of her shame. She was warm, and beneath the Coppertone and the plum-scented perfume, she smelled like she’d been in the sun all day, laid out on a lounge by the pool out back before I got there. It occurred to me -- maybe then, maybe later -- that it was me she’d been preparing for, maintaining a tan and smelling good all these weeks, swimming laps to stay in shape. I’d like to say it wouldn’t have made a difference to me how she looked, that I saw her inner beauty and would have wanted her no matter what, but that would be a lie. She glowed on those summer evenings, dressed in white to highlight the bronzing of her skin, and it was her body I wanted, nothing more. Up to that point in my life, I’d considered myself a deep, more or less pure person, but she had tapped into something else, some evidence of my truer self that I didn’t quite understand or know what to do with. It scared me, that an act so basic could echo in other

regions of me, and maybe repeating the act that had exposed the truth was the only discernible solution at the time. I don't know. Anyway, up the stairs and to the bedroom.

The upstairs of the house was lit dimly from outside by the orange glow of street lamps. I knew the layout from sleepovers with Lucas when we were kids, and inched my way along the hallway in the near dark, not wanting to disturb Mrs. Tyner or anything else if I could help it. The sexual charge I'd felt before had ebbed. There was no chance of it now, the soft and hard act we'd been practicing all summer. The best thing to do would be to lay her down, pour a glass of water, and wait for her to sober up. Between health class and having dealt with a few overly drunk friends at parties, I felt prepared for this situation, well versed. I got her on the bed, into the sheets with some struggle, and I drew the curtains shut so the room was completely dark. It wasn't until I was waiting for the bathroom tap to run cold that I noticed, in the corner of the room, a small cage enclosure, and inside it, a puppy. Some kind of hound with ears bigger than the rest of it. I'd turned the bathroom overhead on, and in the peripheral blade of light it cast I saw two small eyes, bright in the dark, like a deer being jacklighted. It was curled up and stirring from sleep. I turned the light off and walked to the bed.

"Who's that?" I said, setting the glass of water on Mrs. Tyner's bedside table.

She moaned softly from under the covers and rolled onto her stomach, causing her hair to hang off the side of the bed. "Hector," she said.

I repeated the name. It was a strange name for a dog.

"Richard brought him home two days ago," she said. "Two days of shitting and crying. And I'm not going to give him a cutesy name like Bo or Checkers and give him the satisfaction. Richard, I mean. He can't buy me off with a small, living thing."

“Buy you off?” I said.

She rolled again, now onto her back. She breathed out hard and pressed the heels of her hands into her eye sockets. She was trying to stop the room from spinning.

“I asked him for a divorce.”

“Oh,” I said. In the scheme of the manor, the news itself wasn’t surprising, or even all that noteworthy. People here split up all the time. Many of the husbands were on their second or third wives. But I didn’t know what to say. Had I caused damage, or had a hand in prompting this decision in her mind? Was I a symptom or a cause? I didn’t want to ask any of that, but the questions welled up in me, and she must have sensed them, because I didn’t say anything else either.

“It’s got nothing to do with you.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Okay,” she mimed. “I know you’re not interested in any of that, I won’t say anything more so don’t worry about it.”

“Nina,” I said. “You brought it up. ”

I sat on the edge of the bed and ran my hand through her hair, eventually settling my palm on her forehead, like I was checking her for a fever. In my experience, it helped people who had imbibed too much to be touched, anchored to something outside themselves, and I thought a gentle, non-sexual gesture might calm her down. It seemed to work. After a few seconds she put her hand over mine.

“We can’t do this much longer,” she said. “When school starts up, this --” She pointed to herself, then me. “-- is over. In fact, we should stop before that if we’re smart.”

“I know that,” I said. “I understand the situation.”

“They’re already set to let me go at that school, and I mean for good. This would really be the ticket.”

“You don’t have to explain,” I said.

“It’s not about goddamn explaining,” she said. “I’m by myself in this house all day or by myself in this neighborhood and if you could just sit there quietly and listen that’d be a great help to me. You don’t have to nod or mumble in agreement or anything. Alright?”

She sat up, and this time being upright didn’t make her unsteady. All at once she’d become more lucid. It might have been the dark room, not being able to see anything.

“Alright,” I said.

There was her soft breathing in the bed, Hector’s soft breathing in the cage, and my own breathing, still labored from carrying her up the stairs. I thought I heard water slapping against boats out on the bay, but I think I just wanted to.

“I don’t know how I’ll ever face your mother again.”

I’ve never understood this phenomenon, the one by which acknowledging the very reason you shouldn’t do something makes you want, even need to do it, especially with sex. She said this, and I reached for her in the dark, finding her knee then sliding my hand up her thigh, under her shorts. She resisted, then arched towards me, fitting her hip into my hand. I reached around and pulled us to each other. We kissed. I’d turn this moment over in my mind for months after: it didn’t make any sense, and it was only the fact that it happened other times with other women over the years that made me stop wondering about it, accept it as the way things sometimes go.

“Tonight,” she said. “This should be the last time,” She pulled her shirt over her head, unhooked her bra.

“Fine,” I said, kissing her stomach, her neck, tugging at her shorts.

“I mean it,” she said. “I really mean it.”

Afterwards, we laid quietly while Hector began to howl. He needed to be taken out, or fed, or held, but Mrs. Tyner didn't move a muscle. She told me about the dream she just had, the one she'd been having for weeks now, about Lucas, a dream wherein they passed a bar of soap back and forth, taking bites. She said these days she always woke up with the sensation of chewed soap in her teeth and gums: a mealy, melting wad. That was all she said, then she turned onto her side, away from me.

There's a couple of ways to tell this next part. It's the part of the story I can't get straight. What I can't get straight is, did I tell her about what I'd seen or not? I remember doing both: listening to her dream, then explaining that I'd watched Lucas burn. In this version, the version in which I confessed to her, I made no attempt to absolve or incriminate myself, saying I should have done this or that, or that I didn't do this or that because. I told her simply that I'd watched him, unsure of what I was seeing, and by the time I was sure it was too late.

But in the other version, I didn't say anything. I slid out of bed, as though she were still asleep, and pulled on my shorts and shirt, now freezing from the cold air inside the house. I walked as softly as I could downstairs and back out to the yard, where, it turned out, I'd left the mower standing upright. Normally, during these visits, I had the presence of mind to haul it around back to the pool, or at least to lay it flat so it wouldn't be immediately visible, but this

time I'd forgotten. And it occurred to me that I never asked when Mr. Tyner was coming back. Right at that moment, he could have been walking up the block, returning from the harbor, or even still out on the bay, navigating the slalom of other boats. If he were really looking hard from out there, he'd see it, Father's mower stood up in his in his yard, long after it should have been there. He'd figure out what was going on, maybe even that it had been going on all summer, and he'd be furious. But first, pulling around the point and down towards the harbor, he'd see the bigger picture. The manor lawns. One by one he'd pass them by: my handiwork, my labor. I'd been working hard all summer, and from a distance, I'm telling you, they all looked immaculate.

Two Lessons

I remember my father shaving, the bathroom all clouded with steam. I could hardly see him but he knew I was there, in the doorway. He said, "Come in here, you should learn this." It was a Saturday. He had me Friday to Sunday but Saturday was the only full day. This was when I was seven.

"It's never too early to learn this." He finished lathering under his chin. His face looked like a snowy field, whiskers poking through the white like wind-bent reeds. "It'll be a few years before you have a beard, but if you're anything like me, when it does come, it'll be thick."

He pulled a stepstool out from under the sink and I stood on it. He wiped the fog from the mirror and then I saw our faces, mine in front of his, like I'd just sprung from him.

"Watch me now."

He started on the left side of his face, from his sideburn. In one stroke he brought the razor down to his jaw, the clean skin like a newly paved road. "Feel that," he said, lowering his face to me. I ran my finger down his cheek. It felt slippery, somehow not human. "Trick is to let the blades do the work. You apply a little pressure, but really you're just dragging the thing. Understand?"

I nodded.

"What did I say?"

"Let the blades do the work."

"Good boy." He went to work on the rest of his cheek. "And never go against the grain, know what that means?"

"No."

“It means shave in the direction the hairs grows. See how it grows down? So I shave down, otherwise you cut yourself.”

I'd only ever seen my mother shave her legs. She went against the grain when she did it. He finished the left side of his face, hit the razor against the sink, rinsed it off, and tapped it out again. I looked into the bowl and saw a wet trail of stubble slowly making its way to the drain.

“People respect a clean shaven man.” He rotated his head while keeping his eyes fixed on the mirror. “People know you're thoughtful, you take the time to look presentable. A bearded man is a careless man, a man who drags his feet when he walks.” He looked down at me. “You'll understand when you're older.”

The steam was starting to clear from the bathroom. Out the window I could see the steeple of the Our Lady of Pompeii church down the street. Pigeons would gather on it and scatter when the bells rang. But after the ringing stopped they would go back and it would happen the same way again the next hour.

“You paying attention?” He was holding his neck skin taut. He tapped on his Adam's apple with his index finger. “Know what that's called?”

“It's the Adam's apple,” I said.

“Learn that in school?”

“I don't remember where I learned it.”

“Did mom tell you?”

“I don't remember.”

“This is important.” He shaved around it in short strokes. “You may never grow hair on yours, but if you do, you have to be extra careful. There's an artery there, if you cut it you could

bleed to death.” He ran the razor over the bump, letting out a short breath through his nose as he did. “There,” he said. “Let’s see your mother teach you that.”

He laughed and I felt his stomach growing and shrinking against my shoulders and the back of my neck. I tried to laugh but I didn’t know what was funny.

“How is your mother?” he said.

“She’s fine. She works a lot.”

“That’s good. Work’s a privilege. You know what that means?”

“No.”

“It means not everybody gets to do it. Your mother’s special.”

The church bells rang. I didn’t turn to look but after the bells I could hear all the pigeons’ wings beating and the busy cooing.

“I have to pee,” I said.

“Hold it. I’m almost done.”

“How much longer?”

“A few minutes. Keep watching me.”

He finished his neck and moved up to his right cheek. He shaved more quickly, not stopping to instruct me. The line of stubble in the sink got thicker, like something was growing in there.

“Finished.” Without looking, he reached for a small towel on the rack behind him and wiped the leftover patches of shaving cream from his face. “Now you try it.”

“I don’t have hair on my face.”

“You’ll do it without the blade. Just for practice.”

“I have to pee.”

“You can hold it. This is important.”

He tapped the razor against the sink one last time and removed the blade. He handed it to me. The weight of it surprised me, and the cold. Cold metal in a room so hot. He used the old kind of shaving cream, the round bar of soap in the wood case. He wet the brush and showed me how to get a good lather from the bar of soap by making small circles in it.

“You want it nice and frothy. The thicker the lather, the less you’ll cut yourself. They have the gel in cans now, but I like this better.” He put the soap down and brought the brush to my face. “Curl your lips in, you don’t want this getting in your mouth.”

The brush tickled. His touch with it was light. He barely made contact with me. He stopped halfway through and put his hand on my chin.

“You look like me, don’t you?”

“Mom says I look like her.”

“If you were a girl you’d look like her. But you’re a boy.” He put his hand on my forehead and tilted my head back. “What do you think?”

“I look like both of you.”

He let go of my head and started putting the lather on again. “That’s a smart answer. Maybe you’ll be a lawyer.”

He finished with the brush and washed it out under the faucet. The steam was gone from the bathroom now. I could see everything. My father had moved to this apartment five months before but the mark of the previous tenants hadn’t worn away. He’d done nothing to make it his. In the cabinet behind the mirror there were expired bottles of aspirin and antacid tablets. The

paint on the heating pipe was cracked and flaky. Little rings of rust sat around the drains in the tub and the sink. Back at the old house my father had always made things better, cleaner.

“I like to start from my left cheek and work my way over,” he said. “That feels right to me. You start wherever you want.”

“How about here?” I pointed to my upper lip.

“That’s fine. Wherever you want.”

Even with the blade removed I was scared of the razor. I touched it to the lather and dragged it down, nowhere close to my skin.

“No, not like that,” he said.

He took my hand and we went over my upper lip again. I jolted at the cold of the metal and I couldn’t imagine doing this every day.

“You can’t be afraid of it.” He finished my upper lip and let go of my hand. “You have to do it confidently. If you’re nervous, it’s as dangerous as doing it with your eyes closed.” He put his hands on my shoulders and squeezed. “Keep going.”

I shaved my chin and moved to my right cheek. Every couple of minutes he reminded me to tap the razor in the sink and wash it out, even though there were no hairs to get rid of. “That’s not the point,” he said. “It’s about getting it right.”

I got better with every stroke. I began to see why a man would do this. It could make you feel new. I’d shaved everything except my neck.

“You’re pretty good at this,” he said.

“Thanks.”

“Bet none of your friends know how to do this, do they?”

“Probably not.”

He put his hands on my head as if to steady it. He leaned closer to the mirror.

“You’ve got my eyes, that’s for sure.”

“But yours are brown.”

“The shape’s the same. Your mother’s got big eyes, perfect circles. She looks like an alien when she opens them wide.” He laughed again. “So the eyes are mine.” He turned my head to the left so I was looking out the door.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“Checking out your profile, seeing whose nose that is.”

He kept me like that for almost a minute. I tried to turn my head back, he resisted.

“Looks like you got my nose, too. Don’t you think so?”

“I don’t know.”

“Look at it, the way the tip of it hooks down. Mine does too, see?” He pressed on the end of his nose. “See that?” He let me go.

“I see it.”

“Don’t say things just to be polite.”

“I’m not.”

“So you look like me.”

“Why can’t I look like both of you?”

“Because,” he said.

He took the razor from my hand. He stuck the blade back into the head. He held it in front of my face.

“I can’t,” I said.

“You’ve got to learn this.”

This wasn’t the first thing he taught me. That was a couple of years before, at the old house. We had a mouse problem. They were everywhere. At night you could hear them scratching around inside the walls. My father laid down traps. There must have been fifty of them. One morning while we were eating breakfast there was a wooden clap from under the sink. “Got one,” he said. But the thing didn’t die right away. When he opened the cabinet under the sink, I remember seeing its hind legs scramble for traction. My father picked up the whole mess, and with his hands cupped, shouldered the screen door open, beckoning me along with a nod of his head. “That’ll happen sometimes,” he said. “Trap will just trap ‘em.” Outside, in our yard, he lifted the bar and separated the mouse from the trap, handling the animal softly, with care, as though it were a pet, something we’d picked out long ago and raised as our own. In the thick grass, it poked its back legs at all angles, trying to move, to get somewhere, but it was no use. The animal’s nose just kept pressing into the sod, as though being pushed in by a different force altogether. The trap, although not entirely effective, had done damage, perhaps severed a nerve or a vertebra. Some crucial connection had been lost, and the mouse’s front legs, though perfectly intact, lay inert. “Oh, hell,” my father said, reaching down for it. He closed the mouse in his hand, leaving the head exposed. He closed his other hand around its head and twisted, like he was giving an Indian burn. “Sometimes, you’ve got to finish things yourself.”

Clear Spells

Between my brother's third and fourth overdoses, the latter being the one that killed him, Mom asked me to come home. I hadn't seen either of them in six years.

"Chetty was real lucky this time," she said, referring to number three. Over the phone her voice sounded weak. She told me how the air mattress he nodded out on had a hole in it, and deflated enough to roll him on his side. A few seconds passed, during which I was fairly sure she held back tears. "He just woke up the next day."

Even for Chet, that was lucky. There'd been people around the first two times: a girlfriend once, and that same girlfriend's young son the other time. Chet had a way of getting people to look after him.

"He's clean?"

"He's going to meetings."

"Are you sure?"

"Baby," she said. "Could you not over-think this? Could you do what your mother requests of you? Just once, if never again?"

It seemed to me it was exactly that -- not over-thinking -- that had gotten our father his overdose -- just the one, which killed him -- and Chet all his trouble: the military, the prescriptions. But I didn't want to stay in Portland. Renee and I were trying life without each other. Or, more exactly, she was trying life without me. I'd cheated several times, and she left. That much Mom knew. What she didn't know was that Renee was seven months pregnant with our child. I thought it might kill her to know there was a grandson or granddaughter she'd likely never meet.

“Is he living with you?” I said.

“I’m renting him a house down the block, where the Galvins used to live. He can’t be under this roof. It would just make him rebellious. This way I can keep tabs.”

“How can you afford the rent?”

“We-ell --” Her voice seesawed across the word.

“Oh,” I said. “Darren. I see.”

“It’s not like it was. He’s not up and down like he was. No more gambling. Now he buys old Nissans and fixes them up for resale. He’s doing well.”

“Does he take as good care of Tracy as he does you?” I said.

“Shut your mouth,” she said. “Just button your goddam lip on that matter. You want to lecture me on relationship values? How’s your wife?”

Darren’s wife had been in a wheelchair for twenty years, unable to speak or walk. Mom fancied herself Darren’s saint, provider of affection and love he wouldn’t otherwise get, whereas I had just run around on Renee, philandered.

“Mark,” Mom said. “Chet’s got a job. He’s not using. He’s doing real good, but I can’t keep track of him all day. This won’t be forever.”

It was foggy and chilly when I arrived, the usual kind of morning in Arcata, even in summer. It was a Saturday. I hadn’t been back since graduating Humboldt State. That was about the time Chet got his leg blown apart by a small IED in Baghdad and earned his discharge. They pieced the leg back together with metal pins, gave him his medals and a wide open prescription: Vicodin, Percocet, and sometimes, if he swore his chronic pain had gotten worse, Oxycontin.

Had they known our father's history better, I like to think they would have reconsidered. But anyhow, one thing led to another.

I knocked and waited on the Galvins' old porch for ten Mississippi's before letting myself in. Part of me expected to find Chet slumped over in a corner with his mouth open and shit dripping down his legs, the way I'd found our father one morning, but instead, I saw my brother bent over a coffee table in the living room. He was working on a model ship under the glow of a reading lamp. He had headphones on, and from across the room I could hear Hank Williams. I stood there a minute, unaccounted for. I could walk right back out if I wanted to.

I flipped the overhead light on and off. I expected him to start a little, but he just closed one eye and stuck his tongue out at me. It seemed like he was trying to look dead. He applied a small dab of glue to the base of a mast, set the mast in place, then took off the headphones.

And I don't know what I'll do-oo-oo, all I do is sit and sigh-igh. My brother sang along in a lilting falsetto.

"Mom tell you I was coming?" I said.

"Course she told me, I'm her favorite."

There had been no question that this was the case with our father, when he was alive. Maybe it was a first-born thing, or maybe it was that he wasn't formed enough as a man to divvy up his love and fondness evenly. It could have been simply that he needed someone to cover for him and his drug use, as Chet dutifully had. I had long suspected that Chet begrudged me for finding our father. He felt he was owed that moment. And I admit there was a kind of upside-down, warped injustice to how that had gone. Though I'd always been aware of our father's addiction in some abstract way, I never saw anything. Chet had actually witnessed it in action.

He'd been present for the buys, policed our father's stupors, thrown cold glasses of water on his face when the occasion called for it. It wasn't until later, at the funeral, when our father had been cleaned up, that Chet saw him dead.

"I heard about the air mattress," I said.

"Yeah, well, yeah. Shit." He held out his left arm and examined the soft skin at the crook of his elbow. "You can barely see 'em anymore."

That sent a shudder through me. Even before the drugs, I never liked needles.

"How do you feel?"

He leaned back on the couch. I took that as a sign I should sit down. I dropped my bags and flopped in the love seat.

"I feel like I've been to war and back, and like I've developed a drug habit. That is, by definition, how I feel. I'm in a real literal part of my life, brother. I'm not going to say I'm doing good, or I'm doing bad, anymore. I'm letting my circumstances, what has happened to me, call the shots."

"I meant, are you in pain?"

"Oh," he said. He considered it for a moment, then rubbed his leg. "Yeah, now that you mention it, it aches a little."

I felt bad for mentioning it. "A little's good, though, right? On the pain scale?"

"The pain scale." He grinned. "That's a good one."

There were footsteps on the porch, then Mom came through the door. She caught her breath when she saw us sitting there.

“Hi, Mom.” I stood and hugged her. She smelled different, or maybe I was just used to Renee’s smell.

“Darren spotted you driving by,” she said, leaving off the part where she guilted me for not stopping in.

“I wanted to drop my things off,” I said. “Chet and I were catching up.”

Just then, Chet stood. His right leg was awkwardly straight, like a kickstand for his body. “You told him about the air mattress?! I put my faith in you!” He sat back down, cracking up at himself. He’d always done that. Mom ignored it.

“He’s got a meeting,” she said to me. “You’ve got a meeting, yes, Chet? Mark, you go with him.”

“To the meeting?” I said. “Like Alcoholics Anonymous?”

“Narcotics Anonymous,” Chet said. “If you want to get technical. But yeah, same deal. More steps than a fucking pyramid.”

“Which one are you on?” I said.

He did some fake counting on his fingers.

“The one where I bring my little brother along.”

“He’s three weeks sober today,” Mom said. “I’m proud of you, Chetty. Mark, it’ll be good for you. You’ll get an sense of what your brother’s going through.”

“You’ll like it,” he said to me. “There’s women there. They’re skinny from all the dope and vulnerable as all get out. I know you like ‘em skinny.”

Mom made to slap Chet, but held back. I thought about Renee. She was skinny. Except now, with the baby, she looked something like a summer squash, the round weight carrying low.

Or so I imagined. I hadn't actually seen her in person in three months, but I'd heard somewhere that boys -- and that's what I wanted, a boy -- I'd heard that boys carried low. She was wrong. Wrong to kick me out. Yes, I'd messed up, no question, but she wanted to let our son grow up without a father. That, I was sure, could never be made up for.

"I'm cooking for everyone tonight," Mom said. "I'm celebrating my boys together after all this time. Come by around six. Yes?"

"Sure thing, Mom," I said.

"Don't be late." She kissed Chet's forehead. She had to push his hair aside, which he kept grown long to hide the spots he'd shot into when the veins in his arms got worn out. She kissed him on those bruises as if to say, I accept you wholly, I love you no matter what. Then she hugged me again and kissed me on the neck. I wanted something more from her. I wanted a private moment wherein she'd assure me that things would be alright on my end, and I'd believe her, simply because she was my mother. But it was clear she'd spent all her worry, the primary and the reserves, on Chet. Plus, I remembered, she didn't even know about the baby.

Once she was out the door, the only sound was Hank Williams, still blaring from around Chet's neck. *I got a feelin called the blu-u-ues*, he sang. It didn't seem like the right kind of music for him to be listening to.

"Are you really sober?" I said.

"Are you really divorced?"

"Separated. Jesus. Mom."

Chet grinned again. He reached over the edge of the couch and came up with a lightweight metal cane, the kind where you can adjust the height. The rubber stopper was worn

way down. He twirled it around like he was miming a show tune, and tossed it ably from hand to hand without having to reach or lean his weight one way or the other. His adeptness reminded me of our father, who, as a hyperbaric welder, had been good with his hands, and acutely aware of himself in space. A kind of underwater acrobat. After he died, when Chet was a senior, and I was a freshman, Chet wore his welding gloves every day, and, in an act equal parts loyal and defiant, got our father's face tattooed on his bicep, copied from an old photograph. He fixed up the Honda motorbike our father used to ride and stopped coming to school. The day he turned eighteen, he enlisted in the army. I was afraid for Chet then, but I admired his ability to pick a north and stick to it, regardless of all else. I was also proud, in a way, to be his only brother, the sole claimant to some part of who he was. I had, for a time, wanted that part to emerge in myself. But now, the image of our father was surrounded by other tattoos of all colors and origins, some military, some just gibberish Chet concocted when he was high. I have no idea what happened to the motorbike, but Chet couldn't even drive anymore because of his leg. I looked at the model ship, which was about halfway complete. A hobby seemed like a good thing.

"I still think we can make it work," I said. "Me and Renee."

"Well, I still think me and heroin can make it work." Chet let the cane slide through his hand till the tip was on the floor. Then he folded both hands on top and rested his chin. "Me and Oxy, me and codeine, me and coke. We're not so different, you and I." With the cane, his scraggly beard, and his rimless glasses, he looked something like a wise man.

Chet's group met in the basement of Saint Luke's, an episcopal church on the edge of town. I'd gone there for a few Sunday services after our father died. The meeting was like I'd

always imagined one to be: chairs in a circle, fewer people than chairs, fluorescent lights flickering in the corners, coffee too hot to drink. Chet dominated the conversation with talk of IEDs, missile strikes, bleeding out, mess halls, fentanyl pops, burn shitters, and his first drill sergeant who was later dishonorably discharged for allowing a new recruit to die of heat exhaustion during basic. It had always been hard to tell with Chet what was truth and what was exaggeration, and his time at war had only exacerbated this problem. It had given him real material to work with that nobody, at least, nobody here, could question. The group leader did what he could to interject some order. When he spoke, everyone looked at their shoes.

Chet had been right about the women, they couldn't have been any skinnier or any more vulnerable. They also looked about fifteen. The only one who looked a proper age and weight sat across from me. She played with her long dark hair and we kept making eye contact. Hers were green. I nudged Chet. He shrugged, meaning he'd never seen her before. I was happy our sibling shorthand hadn't totally deteriorated.

Group Leader had a tendency to go on as well: "I am guilty of the following things: disgracing my mother and father, stealing from the good business owners who employed me, destroying the property of others -- both public and private --, professing love to multiple men and women in order to obtain alcohol and drugs, flagrantly and deliberately defying a police officer, and defacing a school, but I am still here. We're all still here. I'm not proud of these deeds of my past, but I am proud that they are of my past. Not my present."

Like always, Chet pushed.

"What about your future?"

"One day at a time," Group Leader said.

“Today I want to shoot heroin,” Chet said. “So I won’t shoot people.”

A few members of the circle sat up and inched their chairs away. Most of the others, the ones, I imagined, who had been in a few of these meetings with Chet before, stayed put.

“Do you miss killing people?” Group Leader said.

Chet set his cane across his lap, then put his hands around it like he was handling a rifle.

“I miss getting those brown fuckers in my crosshairs with their brown eyes and their brown landscape. Brown fucking shoes, brown clothes, brown food. I miss having them at gunpoint, seeing the whites of their eyes, the only white they got in ‘em.”

Group Leader, who himself looked to be of Indian or Pakistani descent, sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose beneath his glasses. The people who had backed away returned to the circle, seeing that Group Leader was bored.

“We’re all the same here, Chet,” he said.

“That’s bullshit,” Chet said. “And you know it.”

I caught eyes with the normal-looking woman again. She sat next to another woman, older, the only one her age in the group, who periodically tilted her head so the young woman could whisper in her ear. I worked out that the older woman spoke no English, and the young one -- her daughter, probably -- was translating for her. I tried a smile in her direction, but she just scowled at me, probably for being associated with Chet.

“Why don’t you talk about your most recent overdose?” Group Leader said. “If you insist on talking.”

I looked at Chet. The acknowledgement had perked him up, but he did what he could to cover his surprise.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said. “I’ve never touched drugs a day in my life.”

“Your mother called me the day after it happened. I know about the air mattress. I’ve been waiting for you to talk about it. It must have scared you.”

I leaned forward. So did everyone else.

“I was high, sir. The whole thing felt like getting hugged by a unicorn to me.”

Group Leader looked at me. What was Mom doing calling him up?

“What about your family?” he said, flicking his index finger at me. “Don’t you think they were scared?”

Chet began to look my way, then stopped. Group Leader kept on.

“Him, there, Chet. Your brother. Don’t you think he was scared? Don’t you think your mother must have been quite scared if she was compelled to call me? Does that strike you as normal behavior? I’m not even sure how she got my number.”

“I fought for my country,” Chet said. “My brothers died in front me.”

It was just like him to play any card he had. This was the military card. It also felt like the fuck you, Mark, you’re still my little shit brother and I can get to you anytime I want, card. When he got like this, I asked myself why I’d ever wanted to be anything like him, but then again, if I was more like him, behavior like this wouldn’t bother me. Maybe. Or maybe he was being truthful, and we weren’t family anymore, and Mom was the crazy one, and our father remained dead so what were we even doing together like this?

I jabbed my elbow hard into his ribs to say, That hurt, you asshole. He held out his right hand to say, I know, I know, calm down. I'm just messing with this fucker. He just needs to know that he doesn't know anything. You are my brother and I love you.

I think that's what he said.

When we left the church, the day had opened up, the fog lifted. Sunlight fell everywhere. People from the meeting lingered outside like kids after a school dance. With hours until dinner and nothing to do, I suggested the beach. Chet clicked his tongue. "I guess my butterfly kick could use a little work."

I drove more carefully than normal with him in the car, although it was my understanding that veterans, the ones who could drive, did so recklessly once they were back in society. This was partly to do with how they'd been trained: to plow ahead no matter what, and partly to do with a boredom that set in once combat was over, a restlessness with how plain civilian life was. Either way, he fell asleep with his arms crossed over his chest. He'd taken off his windbreaker, and I could see the old tattoo of our father, embedded between a flaming, mouth-agape skull, and a diagram of an AK-47, with lines identifying the different components. Our father seemed strangely in place between those two images.

I drove us out to where the bay fed into the Pacific, near the state park. This was where the Navy yard used to be, where our father had gotten a lot of work, and occasionally taken us fishing. It was also, Mom had speculated, where he'd developed his drug habit in the first place, with shipments coming in through the military channels. I drove the long, narrow coast road until the shoulder widened, and I could get the Jeep all the way outside the line. On this stretch of the

beach, there was a jetty with a few skiffs tethered to it, bobbing on the current. Chet didn't stir right away, the way people usually do when a car stops. We sat there, me awake, him asleep, for a few minutes.

"Did I mention that it's good to see you?" Chet said.

His posture hadn't changed, I thought he might be talking in his sleep.

"I mean," he continued, "I know the circumstances aren't ideal. I know your life is falling apart, and that you wouldn't have come back otherwise. And you are an asshole for never calling, never checking in. But forgetting all that, focusing simply on the fact that you are here with me, now, it's nice."

He pulled on the lever under his seat and slid back. He rolled up his pant leg and rubbed around his calf and knee. There were just as many tattoos there as on his arms. I wondered about the percentage of inked to bare skin on his body. The leg had gotten thin, the muscles having mostly atrophied. It didn't match the rest of him. It looked like a transplant gone horribly wrong.

"My life is falling apart?" I said. "You're funny."

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a flattened pack of cigarettes. He lit two in his mouth and passed one to me. I wasn't smoking anymore. I was going to be a father. I handed it back. Chet took it and squeezed the cherry out with his fingers. He took long drags from his and didn't tap off the ash off. The smoke filled the car, and eventually I opened my door and rolled down Chet's window. The ocean air passed through even and calm, as if nothing was in its way. It was an incredible day. The clear sky, the sun, it just didn't happen very often there. We could have been somewhere else. Southern California, Tahiti.

“Well,” Chet said after a while. I waited for him to follow it with something, but he didn’t. He seemed to have worn himself out at the meeting. We sat and watched a small fishing boat leave the bay, level at first in the protected waters, then rising and falling as it got farther out on the ocean. We watched it until the glare of the sun made it impossible to see.

“The world is flat,” I said. “He just dropped off.”

Another car pulled up next to us, an old Subaru with rust around the wheel wells. It roared like a truck, and when the engine was cut the whole frame vibrated a couple of seconds longer. The passenger side window rolled down, and I saw the green-eyed woman from the meeting. Next to her, in the driver’s seat, was her mother.

“Beautiful day,” Green Eyes said.

“Yes,” I agreed. “It is.”

She got out, then walked around to the other side to help her mother. She didn’t need a cane, like Chet, but going from sitting to standing gave her trouble. Green Eyes took her by the elbow, and together they negotiated the uneven sand.

“That’s the one you like,” Chet said.

“No,” I said. “My wife is.”

“Sure,” he said. “That’s why you’re here.”

With more quickness than I thought he had anymore, he got out of the car and hobbled after the women. It was so sudden, so unexpected, that I didn’t try to stop him. Through the windshield I watched my brother catch them up, introduce himself, and shake their hands. He’d done this when we were kids too, meddled as some kind of Cupid. I remembered it specifically with regard to Cece Repko, the girl I’d crushed on for all of lower and middle school. One Friday

as we were getting on the bus he slipped a note professing that love into her backpack. He had signed my name at the bottom. She didn't so much as look at me again that year. I never knew what he wrote, and I never worked out how much he sincerely thought he was helping.

He and Green Eyes shared a laugh like you might see at a cocktail party, and he even managed to get a smile out of her mother, who had initially seemed wary of the whole thing. He came ambling back towards the car with a shit-eating grin on his face. Behind him, the women conferred.

"What'd you do?" I said.

"I invited them out on the water," he said. "We're crab fishermen."

"We don't have a boat," I said. "We're not even dressed like fishermen."

He turned and pointed to the skiffs along the jetty.

"They don't know the difference," he said. "They're Estonian or some shit. Hardly any English between them."

I checked the time on the radio display, hoping for an excuse. There wasn't one. We had hours to kill.

"What," he said. "Not skinny enough for you?"

"Renee's pregnant," I said.

I watched his face. He rolled his tongue around the inside of his cheek, then raised his right eyebrow, something our father taught him to do.

"If that's true," he said. "Then I really don't know what you're doing here."

We picked the only skiff with a motor, and Chet kept lookout while I got it unmoored and pulled it close to the dock. He climbed in and helped the women get situated on the bow side bench. He had introduced them both as Esmerelda, to which neither of them objected. He gave the pull cord a few tugs before conceding that with his bad leg, he couldn't generate the necessary torque.

“What happened to you?” Young Esmerelda asked, her voice heavily accented.

“Crab bite,” he said.

I got the motor going, and pointed us out towards the mouth of the harbor. When we were clear of the rocks, Chet moved my hand aside and took over the rudder. It occurred to me he must have missed driving, and it appeared to give him a great deal of pleasure to be in control of something. He steered with his right hand and rested his left arm casually on the side of the boat, the way you'd hang your arm around a girlfriend's shoulder. The chop was worse than I thought it would be, but with our combined weight, the boat actually handled alright.

Young Esmerelda smiled into the wind and sun. The mother held her purse close. Chet spouted off some lies about he and I running a family business, providing fresh crab to local restaurants. “But we're striking out on our own soon,” he said. “Importing a chef from Portugal.” With the motor going and the wind picking up, it was hard to hear, and Young Esmerelda just nodded at everything. I tried to follow Chet's leads, to contribute to our lie, but what had my attention was the growing darkness a few miles away. Although the sky over our heads was blue and bright, a murky cloud stand had begun a slow crawl from up north; something nasty Oregon had been dealing with. Soon, if we didn't turn back, it would be our problem. I nudged Chet. He nodded and patted my knee. Just a little longer, he was saying.

A few minutes later, he slowed the throttle and began the false search for our crab traps. He dipped his cane in the water and felt around, pretending to use it like a hook. On one of his attempts he almost fell out. I gripped his belt to keep him steady. When he felt me anchoring him, he leaned way out. This is my older brother, I thought. Ten weeks later he would relapse and die.

He finally gave up the search, turned his palms to the sky, and sat back down. The swells had picked up, sending ocean spray onto all our feet when the stern fell, and the mother had begun to look a little green. Young Esmerelda whispered something in her ear, and the mother's lips moved as though she were repeating everything she was hearing, memorizing a script. Young Esmerelda took the purse the mother had been holding so tight and began rooting around in it.

"You know," Chet said, looking reverently out towards the horizon, "I never actually killed anybody."

Something thumped in the bottom of the boat. It was a heavy sound, and I thought at first we'd hit a buoy, or maybe drifted across some underwater tripwire and set off an as yet unexploded depth charge. But when I looked I saw on the metal floor a clear plastic sandwich bag, the big kind, filled halfway up with pills. Yellow, green, blue, white. Across the boat, the look in Young Esmerelda's eyes was suddenly serious.

"Four hundred," she said.

I shook my head no, and looked to Chet for a cue. He was fixated on the contents of the bag, much of which I'm sure he recognized.

"Four hundred for bag," she said.

“There’s been a misunderstanding,” I said.

“We meet two men,” she said. “Sell pills.”

“We’re not them,” I said. “You’ve made a mistake.”

The mother rooted around in her purse some more. She had to lean in close to see what she was looking at, and after a few seconds of fumbling pulled out a Swiss Army knife. She pried out several other features -- the nail file, the Philips head -- before finding what she was looking for, the big blade. She held it out to us like an offering, though she meant it as a threat.

“Did you work something out here?” I said to Chet.

“Nothing,” he said. “Marky, I swear to God this is some language barrier bullshit. I just wanted to have a little fun. Fucking Estonians.”

“Latvia,” the mother said, twisting the blade in the air.

“We don’t have any money,” I said. “I’m going to be a father.”

The mother sat forward and swiped at the air around my nose. “Four hundred,” she repeated, nearly tipping over as her weight settled. I raised my hands slowly to show that I presented no danger, although I wasn’t sure if they did either. We were all quiet.

It was then that with a flick of his cane Chet knocked the knife out of her hand and into the water. They both watched it arc over all our heads and disappear immediately in the chop, which had turned gray under the gathering clouds. With their threat neutralized, the women held each other fearfully, certain that we were going to do them harm. Chet kneeled on his good knee and picked up the bag of pills. He held it out to them. “These are worth way more than four hundred,” he said, placing it back inside the mother’s purse.

I got the engine going again, and Chet immediately took over. The encounter had energized him, provoked some reaction he must have been missing all along since coming home. The way I figured it, these women must have had gotten themselves into some kind of trouble, trouble that would be awaiting them back on the shore, and I pitied them, wanted to show mercy. But Chet saw it differently. In his mind, they had wronged us, and they needed to be taught a lesson. He wanted to scare them. He gunned the throttle and we skipped along the water, in the direction of the squall. "You gonna thank me?" he said at one point. "I saved your life."

Here's what I thought would happen: I thought the storm would meet us, close around the skiff and hide everything: the land, the sky, the lighthouse. It would be impossible for us to get back to shore, and we would capsize or freeze. But that's not what happened. The storm, though furious, was not meant for us, and despite Chet's hot pursuit, stayed well away and skittered out to sea. I watched the curve of the coastline get smaller and smaller over my shoulder, until eventually, it disappeared all on its own.

Vertical Spaces

Dear Mom,

Could you tell dear Dad to stop sending my old basketball and baseball team photos? It's not that I don't appreciate the sentiment (although I can't readily pin down what said sentiment is), I just don't understand what finally is the point of me possessing them. I think they make much more sense in your home than in mine. Sorry to start off with a complaint. Give him a hug for me too.

In response to your voicemail (all two minutes twenty-four seconds of it), I'm doing well. The job hunt is slow going, but if I'm honest, I haven't really thrown myself full bore into it. This last year took a lot out of me and I haven't replenished my reserves yet. Thank you for helping out with my rent these past couple of months, I know this isn't what you had in mind when I moved to New York, but I promise promise promise this is the last time I'll need your money. Also, you don't need to tell me you're proud of me at the end of every message you leave. I realize how ridiculous it is for me to take issue with that, but please stop. Say anything enough times and people will stop believing you. I get it, you're mothering me double time because I went up on that bridge, but it doesn't help hearing that you're proud of me simply for existing, and I swear I don't need the affirmation. I am doing a lot better.

I'm writing instead of emailing or calling as part of Dr. Fonder's approach (thanks for helping me find her, by the way). She thinks the slow deliberation required of letters will help cultivate some patience and calm in me that will then let into other aspects of my life. She said write to anybody, whether or not they can be reached. Maybe she's on to something; I feel pretty good right now. I like her. She answers my questions as best she can and admits what she doesn't

know. She doesn't dodge around anything and she hasn't tried to pass me off to someone else. This is probably more emblematic of her professionalism than any personal fondness she has for me, but whatever it is I like the feeling of someone who's not a blood relative sticking it out with me. Also, she's trying not to medicate me, which I am grateful for. I don't fully comprehend where I've gotten to, psychologically speaking, and the worst thing I can imagine doing would be to separate myself from it with pills. I want to be in the room with whatever this is.

Was I depressive as a kid? The first time I remember getting really down was two days in the winter of seventh grade. Once I was out the other side of it I figured it was a freak occurrence, a visitation from something external, but the pattern's become so reliable now I can't imagine my life without it, though I would like to. Up and down, the polarities more extreme every time. Sometimes I feel like getting my ends pulled is thinning me in the middle, making me porous, a thing other things pass through, nothing sticking. But as a kid, did I lapse into those valleys? I don't know what I'd prefer the answer to be here. If it's yes, then there's a kind of harmony or sense to my life, although with it also an inevitability that I'd rather not subscribe to. If the answer is no, then something went wrong along the way. You don't have to get into it if you don't want to, I'm just thinking out loud. Or on paper, whatever.

I've gotten away from what I originally wanted to say, which was simply a catch-all kind of thank you. I know I haven't made things easy for you recently, and I do not take for granted what you and Dad have done for me, financially and otherwise. You've got all your eggs in one basket with me being your only kid, and I guess that's not easy on any of us. I am doing my best, I promise you that, and as I said before, I am doing better. I will not put you through anything like that ever again. I'll write again soon.

Love, Gordie

* * *

Dear Amigo -- Dear Martin,

It was nice having you stay last week. I'm sorry we didn't go out on the town the way you might have wanted to, and it means the world to me you didn't give me a hard time about it. Frankly, I just wanted to be in the company of someone who's never caused me any trouble, and you were it. Congratulations again to you and Lauren on getting pregnant. I look forward to meeting the kid once he/she exists. I'm impressed but unsurprised that you and L are still together. I've been rooting for you both since college, and am happy that mine was the smart money.

Forgive me if I talked your ear off about you know who. It's just tougher than I thought it was going to be. You've been right for years about her and I ought to have listened earlier (I'm listening now!). That's the last I'll say about it, hand to God scout's honor and all that.

The fact that I barely see you anymore is one of those realities of time moving forward that I just can't accept wholesale. We all have to find our own way but where exactly does it say you can't be near the people you like most? I miss the dorm life: our radio show, smoking cigarettes all night, the big endless playdate that that phase was. I know, I know, I'm overly nostalgic. Fine, I'll shut up. Just wanted to say hello. I'm coming to visit once that little fucker pops out. Hope it gets Lauren's nose. Over and out.

Yours, Gordie

* * *

Dear Margot Lassiter,

If I ever see you again I'm going to do what I should have done in fourth grade and drop to one knee and stay there until you agree to marry me. My name is Gordie Hollins and until the fifth grade we were classmates at Saint Luke's School. Like the rest of the boys, I was in love with you, only I was really truly irretrievably in love with you. I never told you, and that, that instance of feeling something but keeping it to myself, pretty much set the tone for the rest of my life. Everything since you has been second guessed and half-assed, somehow muted. I left that school and haven't been sure of anything since.

What I remember most about you is that you dipped your broccoli in ketchup. Do you still do that?

You won't be reading this, as I have no idea where you live these days. Why, you might ask, don't I just find you on Facebook? Well, if you must know, I'm in therapy to address some recent extreme actions on my part and letter writing is part of it (I might find you on Facebook anyway). What actions? Since you insist on prying, I climbed to the top of the Brooklyn side pillar of the Manhattan Bridge and stood there (actually I got scared of the wind blowing me off so I lay down) until some policemen and medics came and got me. Actually, I called them myself once I was up there. Someone else might have seen me and called too, but pound for pound I'd say it was probably the most cowardly suicide attempt on record, if it even counts as an attempt. Effectively, I was a kid with his head stuck in the banister. Yes, it was a humiliating ordeal. No, I did not learn anything about myself from it, only confirmed what I already suspected. Hasn't it been nice catching up?

Gordie

* * *

Mr. and Mrs. Simon,

Get off my ass about the rent. Fix the leaky fucking roof and whatever pipe it is that makes scalding water spew unexpectedly out of my shower head. I've been duct taping the holes in my ceiling, for Christ's sake. This is no way to live. I've never caused you any trouble as a tenant, and I've never reported you for being slumlords. I've seen some of the other apartments in this building. I've seen what you call bedrooms (cutting a hole in a wall and installing a frame does not a window make!) and I could have this whole place condemned in a week. None of us wants that. I like living here.

Gordon Hollins, 4C

* * *

Dear Lifesaver,

If memory serves, the name on your tag is Perez, but I'm addressing you as Lifesaver because somehow it hits the ear wrong to only use a person's surname. I think it implies a kind of contempt, of which I have none for you. And we both know a mister wouldn't have sufficed. What is the title for paramedics, anyway? It's not doctor, is it?

I don't know how many letters like this you get. I'm saying -- though I don't mean to question your abilities -- I don't know how good you are at your job, so I don't know if this one will stick out in any way. I guess I hope it doesn't, that you're flooded with thank you's from people like me. About four months ago, you talked me down from the ledge on the Brooklyn side

of the Manhattan Bridge (in case you wondered, I picked that bridge for its color, I love that blue). I forget if we exchanged any pleasantries during or after. Do all of us run together? Anyway, my name is Gordie (like Howe, I'm originally from Detroit), and I wanted to kill myself. I'm in therapy twice a week now, this letter writing is part of my process (her idea). You're the only person I truly want to hear back from.

I realize now I was never going to go through with it (not to suggest for a single moment that you did not help me!). I thought about it too much. If I was going to kill myself I would have killed myself. I had plenty of sharp objects in my apartment, plenty of NyQuil behind the bathroom mirror. I think one of my friends even has a gun I could have borrowed. But no, in the spirit of New York City, of vertical spaces, I thought I'd jump from the goddamn Manhattan Bridge. I think it tells you all you need to know about me to see how much mental rather than physical energy I put into this endeavor. I am not a man of action.

Do you remember how you started our conversation? Again, this might all run together for you, but I'll never forget it. You said you were five minutes from getting overtime pay, that if I waited five minutes you'd make an extra however much to take home to your family. Do you understand how effective that was? The multitude of levels on which that strategy worked?

- 1) You got me thinking about you instead of me, of something as simple and crucial as take home pay
- 2) You bought yourself five minutes, an eternity in that circumstance, plenty of time to talk to me further

- 3) You put the idea of family in my head, the one I came from, the one I might have someday
- 4) You spoke calmly. This was a day at the office for you! When I thought about how unremarkable a thing it would be for me to do, to go splash in the river or splat on the ground, how from your perspective I would just be another jumper down (I looked up some professional terminology. Before I told you my name I was just another jumper up), the whole thing seemed ridiculous.

So was that all from a script you follow? Is there a science to talking people out of the most final of deeds? Or is it just a sense you have? I don't imagine most people are cut out for your line of work. It can't be easy to strike that perfect balance between empathy and practicality, especially if a situation like mine is confronted often enough. How do you not just get sick of all the sad bastards the world has to offer?

You don't have to answer this (assuming that you'll respond to this letter at all), but how many have you lost? How many jumpers down are there on your resume? Or do you just omit that kind of stuff (I would)? Do you see their decision as a failure on your part, or an inevitable conclusion to their sad bastard lives? Do you guys keep track of the stats? Also, what am I in your book? I was a jumper up for having climbed up there, but then I didn't jump, so do I retain jumper status, or am I something else?

Why I was up there: It's embarrassing, so run of the fucking mill it sometimes makes me wish I had jumped. A woman. A fucking woman. A woman -- let's call her Phyllis (not her real name, I'm giving her an unattractive old lady name, it helps me cope) -- who loved me and then

stopped loving me, and married someone else. This was a long time coming. We took turns blowing it. On and off forever. We were high school sweethearts, college sweethearts, college heartaches, out of touch, back in touch, post-college sweethearts, out of touch again, friends who couldn't really talk, fuck buddies, fuck heartaches, promisers of better things, silences on either end of a phone call, and briefly -- very briefly -- engaged. To me -- how else can I put this? -- to me, she glowed. I had the conversation a hundred times with every friend of mine, about how she wasn't good for me, she was my kryptonite, but when I was in her presence, it was as if my senses sharpened themselves to receive her. There was nothing I could do about it. Wow, that sounds like an addict. I've never been addicted to any substances, just Phyllis (Ha! That really does help!). But at the end of all that, at the point where we both realized we couldn't start over, undo what was done, wipe the slate clean, it became a race to see who could live without the other first, and she won. She married this other guy (I can't even give him a fake name, if I acknowledge his existence as a real human shaped person I'll go fucking insane) a year ago. I must have gone into some survival mode at that point, because it didn't bother me at first. She invited me to the wedding (in the interest of being friendly, not friends), and maybe that would have been the thing to do, go despite or because of the high pain payload it would have delivered. We're resilient creatures, most of us, I don't know if I am. I avoid discomfort. Maybe I should have gone, for closure. But basically, for about three months, I (or some part of me, there's no way I was in control of this) was able to put it out of my mind, to occupy myself with other things. I teach -- taught -- sixth and seventh grade English, and for about three months I went *Stand and Deliver* on my classes. These were private school kids, so it's not really an accurate analogy, but I was at the top of my game. There's nothing like misery to jumpstart the

afterburners on the rest of your life (I'd experienced the Phyllis Effect once before, in my sophomore year of college. I barely talked to anyone for a whole semester, kept my head down and made the Dean's list). I read my kids' papers four or five times, late into the nights. I got it through many of their heads how arguments don't have to be right, only convincing. Make up your own logic, believe it, and act accordingly. And goddamn if their work didn't improve. Yes, for narcissistic reasons I'm inclined to believe their work improved. But it really did. Something in me slipped, though. One morning, one of my sixth-graders came to me before school. He had a paper I'd graded recently opened to a page in the middle. He said what's this and pointed to the margin. I'd written, "This is so fucking boring." I recall thinking this many times about those papers. I'm surprised this only happened once. What could I do? I thought about offering him money to keep quiet, but it didn't matter, his mom and dad had both seen it. Within twenty-four hours I'd heard from both of them and the headmaster, who for reasons of fondness allowed me to resign rather than fire me. So, somewhere between losing my job and facing the reality of a life completely without Phyllis, I got myself up to that ledge. Those are the measurable causes, I guess that's not the same thing as why. I guess I'm like anybody. Peaks and valleys, only with some factory defect that doesn't allow me to cope with the latter efficiently.

By the way, it's a beautiful evening. I'm sitting on the roof of my building scribbling this to you in my notebook (I might type it up later, my handwriting's shit), and I didn't want you to think I'm totally incapable of simple pleasures, that I could only dwell on my deep dark past. Yeah, I'm working through some things, but at this moment I want you to know that right now I am inclined to thank you.

Sincerely, Gordie Hollins

PS - Ever talk any women down? I know women try more often, but it seems like they tend to do it quietly, not flinging or hanging themselves from anything. Pills, warm baths, that kind of thing. Am I wrong? I know men have a higher success rate. When that phone rings, do you have a picture in your head of how the person's going to look? Do you expect to succeed or fail? Do you expect anything? Here's hoping you write back.

* * *

Dear Gordie (age six),

Well, kid, you did it. You grew up to be a superhero, congratulations. You got a cape and everything. You fly around plucking bad guys off the street and dropping them into jail cells. Here's the thing though: you're not alone. Turns out, thanks to extensive and secretive government research conducted since the end of World War II, there are now a shitload of superheroes in the U.S., and you've all got assigned jurisdictions (you cover Houston Street to South Street Seaport river to river). It's a branch of the military now, they hand pick the best and brightest (you!), inject you with whatever cocktail they've come up with (they re-up it monthly, and don't worry, you're over your fear of needles), and off you go. You're fast as light, strong as gravity, you can see to the horizon, hear a worm fart, and punch through anything dumb enough to get in your way. It's awesome.

Of course, because you're a government employee, they pretty much say when you retire. There's not a predetermined age, but you are subject to the whim of the man, and if you make too many mistakes in the field (civilian casualties, etc.), you're out. Pension, benefits, all that's

taken care of, but you're out and without an identity to call your own. Another annoying thing: given that there are so many of you (at the time of this writing, roughly a thousand coast to coast), they stopped letting you choose your superhero names. Now they just assign you a serial number, like you're a fucking iPod. Your hero # is CF391 (don't ask me what the hell any of that stands for), and you report to the office Tuesdays and Fridays to go over your quotas.

I won't even get started on the rivalry with the cops, or the union stuff. Absent from the magic serum is the ability to do paperwork quickly.

All this to say, you got what you wanted, but it's not exactly what you thought it would be. I'd tell you life's tough, wear a helmet, but you don't need a helmet. You're a superhero.

Love, Gordie

* * *

Phyllis,

There are songs I didn't even listen to when we were together that provoke memories of us that don't actually exist! It's bonkers. Buddy, I can't get rid of you. I've got a memory of us in Paris. We never went to Paris! I've got a memory of us in Paris, in a small hotel room whose windows open onto a narrow alleyway. In the memory our windows are open, the blinds are drawn, and it's a kind of white, cold afternoon. I actually don't have a visual of us in the room, it's just that light, those windows, the curtains swaying in the breeze. I see the room from outside, and I know we are in there.

Another has us in a red Volvo station wagon on a small state road in Vermont, near where you went to school. It's wintertime, dusk. Okay, so this one does have some familiar elements,

it's not from nowhere. I remember that road clear as day, driving that corridor to see you on the weekends. There's nothing quite like that north country wintertime, that particular kind of green dark, and there's really nothing like being in a dorm room together, like we often were, skipping meals and plans with your friends to keep on fucking. Not to be crass, but that's what we were doing. We never stopped being good at that.

Remember the summer before I left Detroit for good? We did a lot of fucking. We knew we weren't rebuilding, or starting anything new, just touching the past together before letting it go. We grew up together in that way, fucking. Still, a cynical summer of nights. I felt like hell except when we were naked together, fucking.

You always said I was selfish. Four months ago I climbed the Manhattan Bridge to jump, die, and have you hear about it. I guess you were right. I wanted to bruise you, have you carry me the rest of your life, although of course, you'd have moved on eventually (maybe even quickly!), perhaps even felt extra justified in letting me go, once it turned out I was the type of person who could do such a thing. You'd have thought how right you were. How right you are. This letter was a mistake.

So maybe Paris is the answer. That memory I have is a projection into the future, a stage waiting for us to fill it. Here's what we do: we fly separately to Paris, book hotel rooms, and see if we end up in the same place by chance. You stay in your room, and I'll just wander the halls knocking. Maybe that's the one final test we take, and if you're there, if we've ended up in the same place, we are meant to be. If not, not. Deal?

* * *

Dear Lifesaver,

Okay, admit it, people like me, we're the worst. Too scared to live or die, these are the lives you save, the boys and girls who cry wolf. And you know what's crazy? We owe them to you, our lives. There's a worn out phrase, but in your case it's completely one hundred percent true. I owe you my life. Ha. Good luck collecting (I imagine you'd be reluctant to receive that payout anyhow).

Here's what I want to know: has anybody ever made it? Gone splat or splash and broken everything, but survived, gone on living afterwards? Cause that seems ideal. Jam all your fear and anxiety and selfishness into one four second fall then go on living. What do you say to those people? Congratulations? Bummer?

Here's what I think: you should have made me do it. Goaded me into jumping. All of us. Who knows what would have happened? I could accept not walking anymore, being paralyzed, whatever. But I needed a fucking lesson. You should have made me do it, goddamnit. I said I don't have any contempt for you, but that's kind of a lie. Who saves a person like me? Who professionally preserves the meek and the desperate? Have you considered the moral repercussions of what you're doing to the gene pool?

I know that all sounds crazy. Maybe these bridges and roofs should just have bungee cords hanging from them, then you could get all the sad bastards in a row falling and bouncing over the city's rivers. Wow! Can you imagine the sight? Now that would really be something.

Gordie Hollins

* * *

Dear Whoever (Whomever?) finds this upon examining my body in the extremely, I promise, unlikely event that I decide to give this jumping thing another try, today, October 2nd, from the roof of my building,

First off, calm down. There's nothing you could have done. You don't even know me, and chances are you were just walking by. Secondly, I might not be dead. It's a four story building, so from the roof I've fallen -- what, fifty feet? I don't know which scenario is preferable for you here: me dead or me alive, but if I am alive, then call the medics, but good God make sure they don't send a guy named Perez, he's dealt with me already and I'd feel awful if he had to do it again. His branch is in Dumbo but maybe it wouldn't be much of a stretch for them to field a call from Williamsburg. But here's the thing: maybe I want to see him again. Maybe that's why I did this (if I did it, if you are reading this on the corner of N. 5th and Driggs Ave.). So, I don't know, call and see who shows up. I've got this idea that he and I are supposed to be friends now, being that he saw me at my absolute lowest point (unless you count this one as lower). I don't feel capable of going out and making any new friends, so maybe he can be my friend. My old friends are all moving on with their lives, getting houses, putting wives in the houses, putting babies in the wives, putting themselves in the babies. How could a system folding back on itself like that be so functional? So pervasive? Oh, no, you think, here he goes: here he goes on a tangent about the cyclical nature of living and meaning is only what we construct and perceive for ourselves, and that meaning is only a soap-bubble-thin membrane around us but nevertheless the membrane that we insist on putting between ourselves and the opposite of living, making it last as long as we can when really, really, we have very little control. Here he goes, you think. Here he goes.

Sainthood

Nolan returned home with arms full of groceries, enough for the week. It had gotten colder while he was out, and the light sweat he'd worked up cooled on his forehead and neck. Low clouds layered the sky. The lines between them reminded him of striated rock, of marks made long ago. He sucked deep breaths, let the cold air scorch his lungs, and exhaled fog. He did it four, five times, and went into the house.

The old man watched television from his chair, knees together, hands on his lap. He was folded with age, weak from inactivity. He half turned when Nolan walked in.

"You were gone awhile," he said.

"Had to go out on Route 50. They don't take coupons at the store in town."

"How much did you have to spend?"

"It's not your money. Don't worry."

"You know I'd work if I could stand."

"I wasn't being short."

Nolan shelved the canned goods, stacked the pre-made meals in the freezer. Neither of them had eaten from scratch for months. He heard the squeak of wheels from the other room.

"Where you want to go?" he said.

"I'm getting some damn exercise. I'm old, not dead."

Nolan turned the cans labels out and closed the cabinet. He flattened the paper bags and stowed them under the sink. He walked to the doorway and saw his father, stuck and struggling. The wheels of the chair cut deep grooves in the carpet, ruts he couldn't get out of. He was

rocking, trying to build momentum. No use, Nolan thought. He went over and rolled him back into the living room.

“Don’t be stubborn. You’ll die from strain.”

“I could have a nurse if you hadn’t quit that job.”

“It was a strike. I get real tired of telling you that.”

“Man should have a job.”

Nolan found the spots for the wheels in front of the television and backed the chair into them. He locked the wheels.

“I gotta hang the laundry. You need anything?”

“A bath. I stink.”

“Gotta hang the laundry first, or everything’ll smell like mildew.”

“Turn the television up.”

“Your fault if the neighbors complain.”

Nolan started with the shirts, pulling them from the basket and clipping them to the line by their shoulders. He worked slowly, shaking out each one before hanging it, picking off bits of lint, doing any task to let time pass unnoticed. The clouds looked closer than before, the day darker.

He peered into the house through the loose-woven white curtains, to the still body in the chair. The old man’s mouth was open, his jaw slack and weary. He figured he’d have a hard time telling when he finally died. He heard himself say, “Least she had the decency to fall.” The wind carried his words, and he hoped nobody was listening.

He reached into the basket for another bunch of clothes. Under the denims and shirts with sweat-yellowed pits, he saw an apron that had belonged to his mother, one she'd worn every evening while cooking. He didn't know how it had gotten there. He held it up. There were permanent wrinkles in the fabric where she'd gripped to dry her hands. The pattern was floral: daffodils and roses and tulips. Wrinkles over flowers, like they were wilting. He turned the apron in his hands, brought it to his nose, inhaled. It smelled nothing like her, only of detergent rubbed off from the rest of the load. Nolan looked over both shoulders, and again at his father, inside. He tried to put the apron on, but the small neck loop wouldn't fit over his head. For a moment, it got stuck just above his ears, and he was unable to see. A small panic ran through him, he worried somebody was witnessing this, his struggle. With his index fingers, he tugged on the loop, tearing the stitching. The apron came off easily. He balled it up and threw it into the next yard.

Woody Woodpecker was making a racket when Nolan reentered the house. The old man's head was tipped in sleep and air whistled through his nose. Nolan watched his shoulders, the sharp bones against his thin white shirt becoming more visible with each exhalation. He walked to the kitchen, took a pot from a hook on the wall, and went to the chair. He unlocked the wheels.

“How long was I asleep?”

“Just a few minutes.”

“I never dream anymore. Nothing I remember, anyway.”

“Too tired.”

“Too old.”

Nolan figured both. He pushed the chair through the carpet, out to the wood floor of the hallway. He locked the wheels again when they reached the bottom of the stairs. “Hold this,” he said, placing the pot in the old man’s lap. Carefully, he scooped him out of the chair.

The tub grew foggier with each potful of water off the old man’s back. His knees stuck out, while the rest of his legs were nearly invisible beneath the surface. They looked to Nolan like small islands. Small islands of man, he thought.

“How do I get so dirty,” the old man said, “when I never do anything?”

“You collect dust, I guess.”

He pushed his chest out, straightened his back as if to withstand the slight. His body wouldn’t hold the posture for long. He slumped and his spine appeared along the arc of his back in blunted triangles. Nolan filled the pot and poured water down the ridge, as if to soften it.

“Spring’s coming,” the old man said. “You can smell it.”

“Wouldn’t know from today.”

“You can smell it.”

Nolan raised the old man’s arm and worked the bar of soap into the pit. The thin hairs took up the lather, their remaining pigment darkened from the water.

“Best thing about living here,” the old man said. “First to the season. We know it before anyone.” He fixed his eyes on Nolan. “That’s why I never left.” His skin felt like it might rip in Nolan’s hands, like it was dead tissue already. He finished under his arm and rinsed the lather from his hands. He stood and stretched, felt the knots in his lower back loosen.

“Where you going?” The old man’s voice, suddenly risen, bounced off the tile.

“Calm down. My back’s sore.”

“I’m calm.”

Nolan knelt again. He pushed aside the hair grown over the old man’s right ear and ran a soapy finger around the canal. It had become routine, like anything else. “Turn your head,” he said. He cleaned the other ear. His finger felt coated in grease.

“I can do that myself,” the old man said.

“You don’t clean it good enough.”

“We should go see your mother.”

Nolan never saw the point. It was hard enough to shed the past. The old man said, “Isn’t right to sit around here ignoring her.”

“People get buried for a reason.”

“Shouldn’t talk like that. She loved you more than me.”

The light from outside caught the old man’s cataracts and made his eyes white. He might be a prophet, Nolan thought, if he wasn’t such a fool.

“People get buried for a reason,” he said, though he couldn’t name the reason.

Outside, a grayness was settling over the region, draining color and depth from the trees and houses. Nolan worried over the clothes on the line, about having something clean to wear tomorrow.

“My head’s cold,” the old man said.

Nolan dipped the pot into the water. “Here it comes.” He poured the water, tried to keep the flow steady over the old man’s head. With his eyes closed, he looked like one of the stone

busts Nolan recalled looking up at as a child. His skin flushed from the warmth, and he let out a short grunt.

“I’m serious about your mother. We haven’t been since putting her in there.”

“Lean forward.”

“Not like someone else’ll go see her if we don’t.”

Nolan dried his hands and rose to the sink. He looked in the cabinet for aspirin to stave off the headache he felt coming. He chewed the pills to a powder and let the bitterness settle on his tongue.

“You there?”

“Yeah, Phil. I’m here.”

“Wish you’d go back to calling me Pop.”

“Pops take care of things, don’t they?”

In the mirror Nolan watched the old man place his hands on the sides of the tub and try to push himself up. His arms shook and the water rippled gently. Nolan turned his eyes to his own face, tried to see his father in it. He wrinkled his forehead, fingered his temple, traced his hairline. “Sorry,” he said. He took the bar of soap and placed it in the old man’s hand. “You got to wash your own parts.”

He walked down the stairs, into the living room. He turned off the television and turned on the radio. After two full turns of the tuning knob, the only program coming through was the Sunday mass. Nolan stretched himself out on the couch and closed his eyes, imagined himself worshipping, imagined the pews, the high, ornate ceilings, people kneeled and hiding from each other, the priest walking to the podium and raising his hands. He saw himself in the back row,

and in front of him, filling the church, there were men like him. The priest's voice cut clear through the thin layer of static. Nolan tucked his arms to his chest and rolled onto his side, facing the cushions. It was dark in that space, where the cushions met, where he buried his head, and soon he could hardly hear anything, not even the priest, over his own breathing.

He opened his eyes to the clothes on the line flapping in a high wind. Rain rattled intermittently against the siding of the house. He didn't know how long he'd been out. He stood and shook sleep from his bones. He walked to the window and leaned forward, tried to assess the damage done. The clothes were alright, only spotted with water. If he hurried, he could save them, pick them off the line and hang them instead in the basement, or lay them across the radiators. But he waited while the drizzle became a downpour. Soon, the clothes were soaked through, his work ruined. Tomorrow, he'd do it all over. He turned away from the window. He walked to the bottom of the stairs. He called his father's name.

The Perfectionists

We wanted the same things, Dee and I. We agreed from the get go to have an open marriage, the idea being that we'd inhabit the outer banks of domesticity. We'd sit back and watch when the storms hit the mainland, where everyone else was. It seemed sensible, enlightened even, and it had worked for seventeen years. We lived with the minor jealousies in exchange for never getting to that place all married couples got to, where each wanted something different and didn't know what to do about it. We'd solved the puzzle before opening it. But the concept had begun to wear thin in me. The subject of children still hadn't come up, and soon, with our age, it would be a moot point. I'd revved myself up a few times to have that talk, but it ran in the opposite direction of what we'd been doing, and Dee seemed reluctant. Lately it was on my mind more than ever, with the holiday season casting its first long shadows and October winding down.

This is all to say, I was in no mood for a visitor. But a visitor is what I got. I came downstairs and saw the French press half empty and toast crumbs on the counter. I could hear Ramsay's voice in our back garden, and Dee's giggles, modulated to sound girlier. I peeked out the window at them. She had her feet up against the edge of the table, and bobbed her chair on its back legs, letting her long auburn hair fall behind her. She wore a tank top and a pair of my flannel pajama pants. She was smoking a rolled cigarette. I could tell by the placement of the Drum tin that Ramsay had rolled it for her. Ramsay had showed in our gallery a month before. I knew people who liked his art, and had sold much of it to those people, making us all some good money, but the art itself wasn't for me. All bright colors and abstraction. You didn't know what to look at. It came as some surprise that Dee had dipped into this well, our place of business. It

was a first. I guess I'd stopped expecting firsts. But there he was. I poured myself some coffee and walked outside. It had rained all night and into the early morning. My bare feet were slick on the patio stone, and our outdoor furniture, all untreated wood, was stained a shade too dark. I looked up. The sky was still gray, but bursting with glare, about to split and start a different kind of day. I pulled my robe close and took a seat.

“Morning,” I said. They didn't acknowledge me. Ramsay was about hip deep into one of his bullshit sessions, and Dee looked to be eating it up. I say she was eating it up because her lips were slightly pursed, and she was taking a long time between blinks. She giggled again. It may have just been the surrounding quiet, but she sounded too loud to me. We had neighbors with gardens of their own on either side of us. That was the trouble with where we lived, those brownstones all in a row: you felt isolated, when in fact you were right in the middle of something.

“The trouble with contemporary art -- the trouble with contemporary *life*,” Ramsay said, “is that nobody knows what they want to say. We're inundated with information. We have everything and so we say everything.”

Ramsay was young. He had stories. I remembered the look on Dee's face from early in our relationship, when I could go on about anything. “When's the last time you had an opinion of your own?” he said.

Here's one, I thought. Leave my home and return to Red Hook. Your art is derivative and your dreadlocks are a form of cultural piracy. I didn't say that, but I reached for his tobacco and began rolling myself a cigarette. It wasn't something I was good at. After I'd spent a whole

minute fumbling with the operation Ramsay's palm appeared in front of my eyes. They had stopped talking. I had their attention. I handed the whole mess over, and before I could sweep my hands clean of the tiny leaves he handed me back what looked like a small white banana. Not perfect but certainly smokable. What could I do? I thanked him and accepted the light he offered.

The most notable thing about Ramsay was his tattoos, which, due to his being shirtless this morning, I could see most of. From his neck to his waistband, you couldn't find an inch of bare skin amidst all the ink. He himself was a work of art, if you're willing to define art as one thing placed upon another, or a space being filled. There was no consistency to the tattoos, no pattern. There were crosses and skulls, hearts and snakes. A driverless motorcycle tearing down a road that ran diagonally from his left nipple -- puckered in the cold morning -- to his right hipbone. Around his neck were the words *I already love you* in Helvetica lettering. He'd once caught me staring at that one and clarified that it was not meant as a flirt or a come on, but as a message to his fellow man. "Leonard," he'd said to me, "we're all in it together."

A couple of drags into my cigarette, while Ramsay began another story, Dee pulled her chair around next to mine. She slid her hands into my armpit and nestled her head on my shoulder. I kissed the part in her hair and rested my head on hers. This was an old ritual of ours, something one or the other of us eventually, inevitably did when a lover hung around in the morning. We got physically close to each other. It was a signal, for us and for them, something to show that we knew where home was. But like I said, I was agitated. Dee had done nothing wrong. We had rules, and she'd followed them: she'd used the downstairs bedroom, and in the night I'd heard the patter of her feet into our bathroom, where the condoms were, but Ramsay

couldn't have been more than twenty-three or twenty-four. Up until now, we'd stuck to contemporaries. It seemed like a bad sign that she'd picked someone his age.

"You've been there," Dee said, touching my arm. Where had I been?

"Really?" Ramsay said. "Chaco Canyon? You were there?"

I nodded. My father had been stationed briefly in New Mexico when I was a child. "All the time when I was younger," I said.

He told me how he'd tripped acid in the ruins, and now wanted to have a show out there, something temporary. He wanted to create everything on the spot, have a party, then burn it all down and leave no trace.

"This sounds like Burning Man," I said. "You're describing Burning Man."

His head bobbed, as though to a beat only he could sense. He didn't seem to have heard me, or, if he did, he didn't care what I'd said. His eyes drifted to his navel, then to the cigarette in his hand, which was smoked down to the size of a roach. Mine had gone out from being rolled too tight. I thought about relighting it, but I hardly ever smoked, and it was irritating my throat. I had previously noted that for all the smoking Ramsay did, the ashtray on our table was nearly empty. I saw now what he was doing with the ends of his cigarettes. Behind him was my one contribution to this modest Eden: a Peace Lily in a large ceramic pot. I'd bought it because otherwise the garden was entirely Dee's and the Peace Lily is a hard plant to kill. It doesn't need much sun or water and is as resilient as anything. This morning, after all the rain, there was about an inch of water that hadn't yet seeped through the soil, which was hardened from several

winters outside. What Ramsay was doing was setting his butts adrift on it, like little white boats in a child's bath. I was imagining toxins from the remaining tobacco soaking out and corrupting the roots. I didn't want the one thing I was responsible for to die. Before I could say anything, Dee piped up, "We met out there." She squeezed my arm. She squeezed my arm because that was a lie, something she wanted me to go along with. Nothing binds people like a conspiracy.

"He chased me down," she said. "Two weeks across the desert. I was camping around the national parks with another boyfriend, but Leonard kept showing up in the same spots as us, and kept passing it off as coincidence." She mussed her hair around and winked at me. None of this was true. Once upon a time, we'd been fixed up by a mutual friend. We'd taken a walk in Riverside Park, eaten dinner, and lo and behold, things had worked out. But together, we'd never been west of Philadelphia. I winked back.

"That's the thing about coincidence," she said. "People like believing it. To me, then, it was like a fairy tale, him appearing over and over. One night I just packed up and left with him."

I liked this fib. I could envision it: Dee quietly unzipping her tent and slipping her boots on, me signaling to her from a distance with a flash of my headlights, the two of us driving all night through that desert, which, at night, looks like the basin of some ocean you can breathe in. Hell, why not?

"I was like Joe Lefors," I said.

Ramsay narrowed his eyes at the name and tried to place it. I began explaining, starting in on Butch Cassidy, Lord Baltimore, the last days of the Old West, but I could see it all hitting a wall just in front of or just behind his eyes. I wished he would leave.

“Well, that’s a hell of a way to get together,” he said. “Wish me and Ursula had a story as cool as that.”

“Ursula?” I said.

“My girlfriend. We met at Cooper Union.” He checked his watch, a gold plated Timex with a digital face. “Actually,” he said, “I’m gonna go wake her. As long as we’re down here we should hit up that farmer’s market at Abingdon Square.”

With the day’s first dose of urgency, Ramsay sprang out of his chair and went inside. I watched him go, recognizing the lift in his step as a feature particular to young men, men who each individually believe that the world is beginning to break his way. I was no exception, no stranger to that kind of thinking at an earlier point in time. And who, at this point in time, could tell Ramsay he was wrong?

“Ursula,” I said again, my voice muffled by Dee’s hair. She sat up and away from me. The air was cold. I felt it reclaiming the left side of my body, where she’d been pressing herself in. I had a nagging thought: if I’d slept in, rolled over one more time and kept the light out of my eyes, I could have missed all this.

“You met her,” Dee said. “At the opening. Blonde hair, red streaks.”

“That’s not the part I’m snagged on,” I said.

Call me old fashioned, fuddy-duddy, milquetoast, I just never developed a taste for threesomes. I failed to see the point. What kind of magic was meant to come from three people dividing their attention two ways? Of greater concern to me, though, was the fact that Dee had gone ahead with it. I’d always figured that if one of us were to go that route, it would involve the other. We would be the two and another would be the one. But we had never discussed it. I had never even really considered it.

“Wait a minute,” she said. “Before you travel any further down that road, consider that maybe, if you woke up next to somebody today, you wouldn’t be upset. Anyway, it’s not like I hatched a scheme. It all happened very naturally.” She kept her index finger pointed as she spoke, like there was a lesson in all this.

“Are you bored?” I said. “Is this lifestyle not permissive enough for you?”

She flushed, and was arranging her next fleet of words when Ramsay appeared in the doorway, now wearing a tight white T shirt and blue jeans, both paint stained. He’d wrapped a rubber band around his dreads and reined them back into a bulky ponytail. The shape of them, in conjunction with his orange coloring, gave the impression of flames bursting out the back of his head. The girl who turned out to be Ursula came up from behind and crept under his arm. She kissed him on the neck, right between *already* and *love*, just to the left of his Adam’s apple. She yawned and rubbed the heels of her hands into her eyes. If Ramsay was a kid, she was an infant.

“You have a beautiful home,” she said.

Like Dee said, she had red streaks in otherwise blonde hair. And like Ramsay, she was heavily inked. The tips of celestial blue wings were visible on either side of her throat. Below the round neck of her shirt, there must have been some kind of angel. Her eyes were green and bright, although the effect was exaggerated by eyeliner. Dee didn't wear makeup. I'd never had to guess what she actually looked like. It was one of my favorite things about her.

"I've just had a brilliant idea," Ramsay said. "Family breakfast out. My treat. For your hospitality. Thanks to your salesmanship, Lenny, I've got some money to spend."

Ursula suggested a place near Union Square. Some recently established speakeasy throwback that served brunch. Knock the special knock and get led through the dark. I was not in favor of this idea. "We have work to do," I said, meaning me and Dee, and it was true. We had a show to install the next day, Monday, and before that could happen we had to repaint the walls, buff the floors, swap out dead lightbulbs, make everything in the gallery look brand new, as close to perfect as possible. I'd set it all up on Friday before we left: drop cloths on the floor, pans and rollers and gallons of flat white ready to go. It was there waiting for us. And besides, I wanted to be alone with her. We had some mounting troubles to wade through. I began to explain about the gallery, but Dee cut me off. She accepted the invitation on our behalf. She did not want to deal with me. Next thing I knew we were walking, two and two, east along Tenth Street. Dee and I walked separately, while Ramsay and Ursula switched back and forth between us, each picking up where the other left off in a story. I heard all sorts of snippets: taking ecstasy at The Hague, doing handstands along the rim of the Grand Canyon, tagging the Eiffel Tower with graffiti. Or some combination thereof. I wasn't listening. I found myself preoccupied with what people on the street might have been making of us. We were an odd looking quartet. I didn't think Dee and

I looked old enough to be the parents here, but I had to wonder. Would anyone guess what was actually going on? Between Tenth and Eleventh street, Ursula pulled on my arm to stop me walking. She had something to show me. She lifted her shirt, revealing a triangle of small circular burn scars to the left of her spine, a detail connected to one of the stories she'd been telling. Had I been listening, I would have known if they were the result of ritual or accident. "Crazy, right?" she said.

I was overdressed, which helped nothing. I've never been good at trusting my instincts, and although I was right about us getting an Indian summer day, I had outfitted myself for more rain. I was sweating beneath my pea coat and sweater, and the sun was only getting stronger.

As we approached Union Square, it became clear that Ursula was not alone in her thinking. The whole of lower Manhattan seemed to have turned out for Sunday morning. The line outside her chosen spot was bent around the corner, and we joined the back of it.

Now that we were still again, we resumed our positions as couples. Ramsay and Ursula huddled tight together, while Dee and I leaned against the building side by side. She'd gauged the conditions just right, donning a faded yellow sun dress and black tights. She leaned on her shoulders and let her arms hang. I reached out and took her hand, thinking maybe I could begin patching this here and now with a simple caress. She let me lace my fingers into hers, but she didn't hold them, instead letting them drift loosely. She felt around with her thumb, like she was trying to identify what material I was composed of. She didn't look at me. We were fighting. We were just like any other couple in that.

After a few minutes and a few steps forward, Ramsay stepped towards the curb to take a phone call. I watched the form of his lips change shape from a relaxed smile into a consternated, tight-lipped squiggle. He said a few quiet words into his phone then rejoined us.

“Bad news,” he said. “I forgot I’ve got twenty railroad ties being delivered to the studio. It’s for a new project. The flatbed’s outside right now and nobody’s there to receive it.”

“Can’t you call your assistant?” Dee said.

“I did. But it won’t do him any good if I’m not there. You need two people to move those things.”

He played with his phone and shifted his weight from one foot to the other, behaving as though there were any choices about what to do.

“So, you’ve got to go,” I said.

“Yeah, I guess. I’m sorry about this.”

Somewhere inside me, a knot untied itself, although nothing had really been resolved. We stepped out of line and walked to the subway station. I pretended to field a phone call of my own when we got near the entrance, balking at the thought of how to say goodbye to them. A kiss on the cheek for her? A handshake for him? I had no idea. Dee saw what I was doing. When they descended the stairs, she began walking south on University without me. I followed her. In that dress, walking alone, she was a vision. Pure light. Sure, I thought. I’d cross a desert for you. No

question. It was a dangerous thought, one that, due perhaps only to its timing, could not be trusted.

“You’re making me feel judged,” she said, sensing me behind her. “I can tell you I don’t appreciate it in the slightest.”

“Dee,” I said. “I was surprised is all, I wasn’t prepared.” I wasn’t sure if this was the truth, or if the truth was something much bigger and worse. I asked her to slow down. Instead, she stopped short and turned to face me. We obstructed the flow of foot traffic. Everyone around us stalled and rerouted like a school of fish.

“This is a fifty-fifty deal,” she said. “Always has been. We promised each other no judgment. If you’re not happy, we can quit it anytime.”

“That’s not what I want,” I said.

What did I want? She asked me.

“I’m worried you’ll think it’s boring,” I said.

She sighed and walked away from me. She turned left at the corner, heading east, away from our home. It was awful standing there, the woman I loved just having put herself out of my sight. I know this to be true: loneliness has no relationship with time spent alone, it’s when you’ve just been left that you feel most isolated.

I took a long walk home, looping down through Washington Square and west to the river. The sun and the heat continued to belie the calendar. Restaurants set up their patios, and people

poked at park grass with their bare feet, looking for dry spots to lie in. It all seemed like some grand, cosmic trick. An alien race far greater than ours turning up the heat, getting everyone outside so we'd be easier targets.

When I got home, I went straight back to the garden. I could at least get one thing dealt with. I drained what little water was left from the top of the Peace Lily. I spread my feet wide either side of the pot and tipped it out slowly away from me. I'd been right about the tobacco. The water was a light, translucent brown, like good single malt. Some of Ramsay's butts – a half dozen in all -- stuck on the inside wall of the pot, and I had to pick them out one by one. I dropped them in the ashtray and sat down.

Dee's flowers, asters and peonies and veronicas, were wilted in their beds, but the sunlight coming down pulled some final brightness from them. I looked at them and started to doze. I had my eyes closed for what seemed like a minute, and when I opened them Dee was above me, leaning on the arm of the chair. The sun was directly overhead, and from my angle she was backlit.

"I'm going to drop Ramsay," she said.

She slid onto my lap and curled up. I held her there. It was really too hot to be that close to anybody.

"Fine," I said. "If that's what you want."

"I think he's a flash in the pan."

It should have been peaceful, sitting there with my wife in my arms. I'd run us aground on the same shores as everyone else, but I'd done it a few turns of the planet too late. I didn't know what we'd do; if we'd persevere or decide to jump ship.

"I like that story you made up," I said. "About the desert."

I felt a tiny laugh go through her, a ripple like a heart palpitation. "Ramsay's not the brightest." She sighed then: a hard, long breath out through her nose. She did this when she was nervous about what she was going to say next. "It's not that I never wanted any the boring stuff. Kids," she said. "But we made a decision, you and me. We're getting it right our way."

"I can't see Ramsay as part of our way."

"I'm dropping him," she said. "But you've got to get over this."

I sat up, which forced Dee to move. She stood, one foot propped against the other, arms akimbo. A leftover pose from her dancing days. The light from the sun had found a way around her, to my eyes. I couldn't look straight at her. I looked instead at the east fence of our yard, and in one of the gaps between wood slats, I saw movement, someone standing there on the other side. I'm not proud of what happened next, but it did happen. I took the ashtray from the table and threw it at the fence, where I thought the eavesdropper's head might be. Ramsay's cigarette butts flew apart like confetti. "Get a good listen?" I said. I stepped to the fence and tried to see over the top. My feet sank into Dee's flowerbeds, wet and soft from the rain. I wedged my toes onto the narrow row of bricks bordering the soil, and with my right hand grabbed the top of the fence to steady myself. I didn't see anybody at first, but when I craned my neck and got a good

view, I saw the neighbors' dog, a Mastiff mix, rooting its nose around in their potted plants. It was a pretty animal: sleek gray coat and a glistening nose. Bulky, capable of damage, but calm and sweet in its demeanor. It looked up at me, and I couldn't remember its name. There must have been a hundred times when we --Dee and I -- had run into these neighbors on our way out the door, and taken turns petting this dog, but I could not for the life of me think of its name. I wanted to stay there, perched on those bricks, but my toes were slipping. I was about to fall over backwards. I got down, kicked the dirt off my shoes and picked up the ashtray. I looked at my wife. "It's alright," I said. "We're alone."