Talking to Dog

Alison Margaret Penning
Baltimore, Maryland

Bachelor of Arts, Williams College, 2007

A thesis presented to the
Graduate Faculty of the University of Virginia
in candidacy for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Department of English

University of Virginia
May, 2014

_____
_____
_____

For my Mama and my best Bro.
Except the one that is, of course, for Sis.

When I write a dad that's awesome—
that one's all for you, Daddy-o.

You are, all four of you, my favorites.

Table of Contents

Other People's Luminaries

I'll do Christmas, of course, for the sake of my girls. I'll do the cookies; I'll do the tree. But you won't find *this* old girl climbing up on some ladder. Not Mama Lou, I say. I'm not risking our lives for some lights, I say. I tell Lee to set the table, please, and I tell LizMarie she can go ahead and paint my nails, if she tells me her times tables, too. When she gets back with the sparkles I put out my hands. Lee places plates out around us. LizMarie tells me the threes, and I think of the three of us, multiplying, forever. She paints my fingernails gold. We're out of remover, she says when she's done. Wonderful, I say. It's there forever, then. Let's say grace.

They want the whole shebang, they do, and I'm doing my best, but it's tough. Kids on the bus route ooh and ahh over the lights all over our neighbor's place, and it makes my girls feel less pretty, I guess. But I just can't compete with a full-blown carnival. This woman, her lawn should be on a show or something. My girls, of course, they love it. She's got Alvin, Simon, and Theodore out there, spinning around, and one of those seven-foot-tall hot-air Santas and the blinking lights weaving in and out of each and every fencepost. Creatures walking along the rooftop and waving from the windows—snowmen and Grinches and Charlie Browns and what-have-you. Reindeer flying across the stained white stucco, and the whole Jesus, Mary, and Joseph get-up, complete with hay bales that feed all the local mice, no doubt, and barn animal sculptures and the old Hallelujah song, wheezing from a tape deck she's got chained to her porch. I mean, we've got lawns here, thank goodness, and she's got every bit of right to tend to hers as she pleases. She's got no kids. Just elves. And for that I am sorry, from the

bottom of my heart. But then I close my eyes at night and those red and white lights are blinking and flashing through our windows like a stalled ambulance, night after night. I want to call her and ask her to please turn it off already. Not to knock a woman down for celebrating the miracle of the Birth and all, but Jesus Christ. As if me and my girls didn't have enough trouble sleeping without *that*.

Been to the doctor with Lauralee yesterday. No one can tell why she's having these aches. All the people in the waiting room are talkers. They're talking, talking, talking, and the one woman leans over, says she's sorry for being so noisy. Usually, she says, I'm as quiet as a mouse. She talks on and on, about this and about that, and then she laughs. Lord! she says. Can't you just tell I left my Bible at home? I shrug with my hands. Me, too, I say, not to shut her up, really, but so I can get back to my magazine. But when the nurse calls our name, the woman, she stands up and hugs me. God bless, she says to Lee. Have a blessed day. And I tell you, I sure wish we would. People say, you got to make your own luck. Well, I'm calling horse poop on that one. We'll take all the blessings we can get.

Next time we go there, I'm ready. I've got a pad of paper for my notes. A list of questions. I pay attention. But it seems no one's got anything helpful to say. Kids hardly older than Lauralee ask questions we've already answered. How old is she? Twelve. History of illness? Just kid stuff. They poke and they prod. How do you feel today? Fine. How's school going? Fine. We get nowhere. In the end the doctor just shrugs, looks at his watch. I try to explain. I tell them how it is when she'll stare into

space and go quiet. I try to describe, but my words won't do it. Lee takes over. It's not one hurt, in one place, is what she can say. She just hurts everywhere. Not every day, but some days. Some days, she says, it's all she can do to lie on the floor in a dark room with her eyes closed. That's how it is, I add, nodding to Lee. I pick up her hand. Sometimes, I say, I lie right down there with her. And I see those students writing *that* down, in their notebooks.

But I know there's nothing wrong with my kind of love. Except sometimes, I guess, there's just not enough of it. Or it's just not enough. I don't know.

The doctor says they have some ideas and they'll run some more tests. What ideas, I say. We'll do them. What tests? He hands me a piece of paper and says, bring this to the desk, we'll get you scheduled soon as we can. But have I considered, he wants to know, pulling me aside as we walk out. Have I considered that maybe part of the problem could be inside Lee's head? Her head, I say. Psychosomatic, he says. I make him spell it. I write it on my pad. We're going to recommend a full psychiatric evaluation, he says. Evaluate away, I say. Maybe something in my head shows on my face because I have to take a deep breath and say, I'm sorry. Please. Evaluate. She's a happy girl from a happy home. We've got nothing to hide. The slip of paper he gave was maybe a bit crunched by the time we got up to the desk. But we're doing them, I tell her. I rub her shoulders up and down. We're doing all the tests, LeeLee, and I know we'll find *something* to fix.

Driving home from the hospital, Lee sits real stiff in the car. I try to make a joke. I say, you turn into a mannequin? Lee doesn't laugh. She says she read it in a magazine.

Lauralee, I say. Read what? In the article, she says. In the waiting room. All sorts of pain can come from just standing wrong. Or sitting wrong. Bad posture, she says. I was thinking, she says, if I can just sit right, Mama, maybe I won't hurt anymore. Lee talks straight ahead, as if she's talking at the windshield. I don't look at her. I can't. I remember when I was twelve, my mama told me not to sleep on the side of my face. The pillow makes wrinkles, she said. She read it in a magazine. I look in the rearview and see that the wrinkles came anyway, on both sides, just the same. I press my lips together, and the wrinkles move around. It's worth a try, I say to Lee. Then we bounce in a pothole and Lee winces and grabs the sides of her seat and it's times like these I want to roll down my window and toss my heart right out on the street.

At work today, somebody gets real funny and decides to dump snow on my desk. "Somebody" Kendrick. I know it. It's not like it's real snow, everyone says. Oh, thanks, I say. And if you're so smart, could you tell me, maybe, how I get fake snow out of my real keyboard? Someone says: a vacuum? It's not like it's real snow, they say again. Like it could be, I say to their backs. Like it could be. No snow this year. All we got this year is mud.

It's been a good week and we've all been singing. Lee's feeling good, for once. LizMarie, she's always feeling good. And Mama Lou? Mama Lou won twenty dollars on her scratch-off, which seems like a good sign. Mama Lou is feeling *glorious*. I feel *glorious*, I say, and I sing out right along with the cd. Well, not *right* along. But when we feel good in this family, we sing. LizMarie's got a voice in her like her mama; that

is—and I don't think it's prideful to say—she's got pipes. Sometimes, I swear, I watch her and get teary. I feel, these days, like I'm crying all the time.

But if I hear "I Want A Hippopotamus" one more time—well, I just don't know. LizMarie's marching around the kitchen, singing at the top of her lungs, loud as a stage show and clear as a bell. She's in a concert at school, and, of course, I've got tickets. Though why they're singing this song sure beats me. *Hippopotamuseses*? *Rhinoceroseses*? Her spelling's bad enough, and they're not even teaching her to *speak* right. Do they make the kids sing it wrong so the parents get a laugh? Now that seems criminal. Yesterday I pointed out to her the words are wrong, and she said, no, Mama, those are the words teacher told us. So I show her in the dictionary. One hippopotamus plus one hippopotamus equals two hippopotami. She rolls her eyes. It's supposed to be *fun-nee*, she says. All right, I say. It's funny. Then I write up some sums for her to sit with.

We've started going to church. Not because I want me and my girls to be Saved. But because I want them to be saved, you know? Safe. Do you get me? The girls don't "get" me. But Lee does what I say, and LizMarie likes to dress up. We look real smart, I think, shaking the pastor's hand on our way out the door.

I'll tell you what. The holidays are a wonderful and awful and curious time. I'm up in the night, watching out the window, and a car pulls up to the curb just opposite. Some guy gets out, jumps the fence, and nabs my neighbor's Baby Jesus doll—lifts him right out from the cradle. He runs a lap around the yard, dodging in and out of candy

canes, holding onto Him like a football. And he gets in the car, passes Him off to the girl sitting shotgun, and they drive away, just like that. If I hadn't been sitting, I might've fell over! I think I laughed a bit, at first, to be truthful. Serves Miss McDecorate right, I thought. She always pulls her blinds closed when we sunbathe out in the yard. As if it's a sin to feel your skin getting warm. But the more I think about it, the more I wonder, what did poor Baby Jesus even do to deserve it? I think about calling the cops. But I have the cat in my lap and her body is warm and I guessed that my neighbor would call in the morning. I wonder if she'll get another one. Another baby for her crib. I think about motherhood, and I cry for awhile. I start thinking about my girls, and there I go, again, blubbering.

Next day, as we're heading out the door, the cops are there. I read somewhere that cops don't much like Christmas. Can't say I blame them. Too much eggnog, too many people driving home from too many parties. Knocking over other people's luminaries and snowmen and such. The cops get in the car and they flash their lights once. They drive away, but other lights stay there. Blinking. Blinking. Blinking.

Google "stealing Baby Jesus" at work. One million, one hundred thousand results. When I get home, my neighbor has a sign up on her lawn: Who took my Baby? Always, when I think that my heart's already too broken to break, it breaks just a little bit more.

* * *

At LizMarie's show, I do cry some. She has a little solo, and even Jacob Malenbaum has a solo, too, in "Marshmallow World." They call it a "Holiday Concert." Though "Christmas Concert" rings right to me, still. But I guess it's just nice, you know, with all this craziness going on, in the Gaza and what-have-you, all around the world and here at home, and with all the murders and killings and drugs on the news. I tell that to LizMarie's teacher, when I catch her up in the crowd. Miss Burke, I say. You did a Good Job. You are a Good Teacher, I say. Thank you, Mrs. Stringer, says Miss Burke to me. I'd say half of them are good, and half of them are bad, I say. The teachers, I mean. LizMarie is pulling at my hand, but I say, I'm talking to Miss Burke, now, please. You please wait your turn. Do you think that that's true, I say to Miss Burke. Oh, I don't know, she says. The crowd is pressing in on all of our sides. Lee's standing over by the wall, out of the way. Miss Burke is stuck between two big fat people. I pull her toward me. You don't think that half are bad? I push my glasses up on my nose. I guess at some schools, she says. Unfortunately, yes, I guess I do, she says. Look, she says, but I say, so what can I do? This is so important, and really, I need her advice. Doesn't that mean, I say, that by the time my girl graduates, half of her teachers will've been bad? That she'll only know half of the things that she should know? We can't let the children down, I'm saying. She's getting pushed by the crowd. I'm only one woman, she says. And I have thirty-three students. And thirty-three sets of parents to meet. I look around the auditorium. Not everyone came, I say. She puts her hand under LizMarie's chin. You were great, darling. You hear that, I say. I turn to LizMarie. You hear that? You were great. I kiss her head. When I turn back, Miss Burke is gone.

* * *

Disturbed about Baby Jesus. Who steals a Baby Jesus? And in what kind of place? And if it's our kind of place, then why do we live there?

Lee's sleeping worse, so I've put LizMarie in my bed. When I tuck her in, I sing her the L song. It's just our names, Louise and Lauralee and LizMarie said over and over, made into a song. It's the song I sang when she came to me, when she was a baby. They sound so nice together, don't you think? Those L sounds, like a lullaby, or a car riding on a highway at night.

At work today I'm typing away, and Kendrick walks up with his coffee. I know it was him that put snow on my desk. A year ago, I saw him steal a potpie from the freezer. I reported him then because he told on me for bringing pencils home. Shoot, I said to him, then. Maybe I bring work home with me. Maybe I use the pencils there, I said. But do you, asked my boss? No, I said. I'm sorry. It was the start of the school year, I explain. Supplies are expensive, and the lists just keep getting longer. All right, my boss said. All right. I get it. I've got three kids myself, dropped a whole paycheck at Staples. Don't do it again, she said to me, and I didn't. And that was that, until he stole the potpie. So when Kendrick walks up and I'm on the Web MD, I don't want him to know that I'm on it. I have so many windows open, and I don't know how to close them all. I turn off my screen. It goes black. Whoa, he says, stopping by my desk. Whoa, whoa. What's going on there, Louise? Nothing, I say. I wait for him to leave. He looks next to my black screen, picks up a photo. These your daughters, he says. They're my girls, I say, bristling. I'm thinking about my daughter that's locked up in Illinois and wants

nothing to do with me. In his hand he holds *her* girls who are *mine* now, and I say to myself how we will all be forgiven, and we all have a chance to do it right. We will all be forgiven. We will all be forgiven. I don't say anything to Kendrick. Nobody needs to know my private business. I wait and wait for him to leave. He's still looking at the picture. They're cute, he says. He puts the frame down. Especially that one. He taps Lauralee. What do you say, Louise? He moves his hand in his pocket. A few years down the line, set us up?

And then there his coffee goes, right down his shirt.

I get called to the office. Like going to the principal's, I tell LizMarie later. Were you scared, she asks, holding my hand. Very scared, I say. I sit down with my boss. I explain that Kendrick insulted my girl. She says, Louise, I understand, I've got three kids myself. But I'm telling you, he could sue. I say, I could sue *him*. She says, look, he's an asshole. But if anyone gets fired, it has to be you. So I tell her about Lee. I have to. I try to keep my private life private, you know? But I tell her. I tell her how no one knows what's wrong and how she can't keep anything down and how insurance doesn't cover all the tests and about LizMarie wanting an iPod for Christmas even though she's only in second grade for heaven's sake and the gas money to and from the hospital and the babysitter when Lee's too sick to go to school and the new organic foods I'm trying and the new mattress I bought to try to help her get some sleep and the phone calls to their daddy and to their daddy's mama. Phone calls that aren't easy ones for me to make. So now there's a can out on the receptionist's desk with Lee's picture on it and a little coin slot in the top. Turns out, I tell LizMarie, you should always tell the truth. The office

collection has raised two hundred and eighteen dollars so far. And too much conversation. Two hundred and eighteen. It's a start, but still. Co-pays add up. I've got my job, and vacation's coming. But, tell me, Holy Lord: what are *you* doing on New Year's?

In the hospital cafeteria, on our way out, the cashier looks at me and then looks at Lee. You two could be sisters, he says. (They say this, I think, for a tip.) Nope, I say. I'm forty-nine. Too old for us munchkins, says LizMarie, picking up my next line. Lee smiles, of course, though it's me that he's flattered, not her. She has big Band-Aids on her arms so I buy a big balloon for her, bigger than the Band-Aids, even though she's too old for that now. We have trouble fitting the balloon in the car. Lee lets it go. Oops, she says. Now what'd you do that for, I say. You owe me six bucks, I say. And I must look serious, because LizMarie asks if I'm joking.

A week before Christmas, we're doing a grocery shop. I buy a bag of oranges because oranges are on special. On Christmas Eve I'll put them in their socks, and one in mine, too, like we had back when I was a kid. Was it Sunday school, or was it history class, that they told us about the oranges? In the Crusades, I guess, the knights would bring oranges back, all the way home from Jerusalem. They'd be all shriveled, but still, they were precious. I try to tell the girls this, but of course they're not listening. These days kids can get oranges any old time. LizMarie puts slice-and-bake cookies in the cart. You promised, she says. And I did. When we get home, we do make the cookies. The Cutco knife's as dull as can be. The Santa face in the slice-and-bake slices is smushed.

When I try to fix it, I just make it worse. LizMarie picks a cookie up off the tray and eats it raw. LizMarie! I say. Still *tastes* good, she says. Lee kisses her head. LizMarie takes another cookie. I turn off the oven and open it up. We stand around the open oven, eating raw, ugly cookies, listening to the radio. The oven is warm and my girls are too beautiful. I write a Hallmark card in my head. My life, I write, is a stained glass window. The people who are in it are light. I lick my lips and seal it up and send it off to who knows where.

Only three days to go. It's Friday night, and the office is closed until Wednesday. At our potluck lunch the other ladies came together and they gave me an iPod. You and your girls have a blessed Christmas, one of them says. Thank you, I say. I will try.

Back at home it's tree-trimming night. I make ravioli casserole, to show the night's special. Two packs of frozen ravioli, a jar of spaghetti sauce, an envelope of cheese—it's Lee's favorite. Starve a cold and feed a fever, they say. Or is it the other way around? Lee's sick again, in any case. My opinion? A good square meal can't make her *worse*.

Down in the basement, under the stairs, the mice have made a nest in our Christmas tree. When I lean in close I can hear them. They're just itty bitty innocent little mice, I tell myself. Innocent, sure, I say. But they're ruining our Christmas. They squeak and scuffle and whisper, and they probably have diseases. I hate them. I can fix this. Find another home, I say to the little mice. I pick up a board game and crouch on the stairs. I lean under the banister, hold onto it tight. I hold my game flat, like a paddle. I close my eyes and I take a breath and I reach out and hit. I hear soft lumpy noises. I

hear their nails on the floor, hear them running. I hit again, and again, and again, to be sure I get them all out. I'm angrier than I thought I was, them ruining my Christmas tree. I hit until I stop hitting. The noises on the floor are different now. I open my eyes. I drop the box and tiny hats and silver cars ping across the floor. The dice roll and the paper money drifts down, partly covering what I don't want to see. I close my eyes and move my hand to my face because I think I might throw up and I don't want another mess to clean. LizMarie calls out from the kitchen, asks if everything's okay. Fine, I yell. I wipe my face. Shoot, I say. I look again. There are two mice left, stunned from their fall to the floor. One looks like it's sleeping. The other one's jerking a leg. Shit, shit, I say. I climb down the stairs, pick up the bottom of the box and I put it down, soft, on their faces. I put the top of the box down, too. I hold onto the pipe that hangs from the ceiling. And jump. I jump on the box until I land in the spot, feel the squish and the slide under my shoes. I step off the box, wipe my face. Oh, God, I say. But it doesn't get to be over yet. I take off the top lid and flip the bottom box over. I use the lid to sweep the bodies onto the box. One of the mice rolls over as I sweep it. Its belly fur is split open and its jaw is hanging off, but the small mouse eye is still full and round and staring. I hustle the mouse onto the box. I can't help it—I throw up on the box. I say another prayer and place the lid on the mess. Leaning against the wall, I wipe my hands on my pants. When I realize I have to get up, I get up. I check on the tree. The tree's got some mold on it. Maybe it's wipeable. Maybe not. I lean in and smell it and what I smell, coming off the tree, well, what I smell is pee. Mouse pee. I find a large, damp box leaning up against the wall. I fold the flaps in so the box has a bottom. The tree, I fold in half. I put it in the box. I put the box with the mice inside the box with the tree. I crouch

and I pick it up. As I carry the box to the stairs my fingertips sink through its skin. I feel the box's ribs. I feel like the box is about to give. I've been getting friendlier with God lately. I say a loud prayer. I don't pray it *out loud*, but I pray *loudly*. At the top of the stairs, LizMarie is waiting. Don't ask, I say. Don't. Ask. I walk across the kitchen and through the living room. Lauralee lies on the couch. The box isn't heavy, just hard to hold. LizMarie opens the door. I walk across the porch and down the three wide steps. I walk down to the sidewalk. I place the box on the curb. What could I have done, last year, to make this year be less hard? I look across the street. Under the blinking lights, I feel the absence of the Lord. I pull my keys from my pocket, open up the car. I drive to the drugstore and I buy us a Christmas tree. I buy myself a stuffed hippopotamus. I get some lights, too, and some nail polish remover. Because I've picked off all the gold.

LizMarie will want to do them again, and this time we'll do it right.

I hope the ravioli hasn't burned. When I turn the corner and I see the house hasn't burned down, I say to myself, Hallelujah.

On Christmas morning, we make pancakes from the mix. LizMarie is jumping up and down. She wants to open presents. But Lee says no. Lee's very quiet but she says that's on purpose. This is her favorite hour of the whole entire year, she says. Breakfast, before the presents are opened. Before Christmas is over, before the wrapping is torn. Before the colored lights are switched off.

* * *

We drive like heck to get to the hospital. Roads wide open. The repair marks on the asphalt glow in the almost-dark. Like curling black ribbons, like someone's in a truck up ahead, spooling them out for us to follow.

In Emergency, we sit and sit. I tell you, I say. She looks fine now. But she wasn't, I say. She was on the floor. The turkey slid first, then the plate—

Have a seat, they say. Get started with the paperwork.

A woman comes in wearing a big men's parka and a dirty Santa hat. Here for my free turkey dinner, she shouts. Then collapses in a chair. The woman unzips her coat and her t-shirt says Little Miss Giggles and she takes off her hat and she looks like my daughter. I fill out some forms. There are a lot of things I don't think about. I think about the forms. Getting them right. Guardian: Louise Stringer. Relation: Grandmother. When I finish, it's still not our turn. The woman is gone, but I can still see her.

On the drive back from the hospital, I hold the wheel with one hand, hold LizMarie's hand with the other. We need to get some clothes for Lee. They're running more tests, they say. Her levels of a few things—iron was one of them—her levels are low. Or high. Something. It's all in my notes. So we'll eat spinach, I say, but the doctor says it might be more complicated. We'll just have to wait and see.

We practice our times tables. We do sevens, because that's Lee's favorite number. LizMarie does her sevens, and we pull in the drive, and I remember that morning.

* * *

On Christmas morning, we ate our pancakes, ate our oranges. LizMarie got her iPod. Lee opened, carefully, all eleven books that she asked for. Folded her wrapping paper, of course. Lined up the books in order of which ones she'll read first. First, next, and later—these are the words that she said. LizMarie gave me a craft she made at school. Lee bought me a little ring and bought one for herself. Because, she said, she wants to get married for once in her life, and she might as well marry with me. To be honest, I cried a little. I want to get married for once in my life, too, I said. We both decided we also wanted to marry LizMarie, so we all drove to the drugstore in our pajamas on Christmas morning and stuck quarters in the prize dispenser until we had two rings each. Right then and there, we slid them on each other's fingers and vowed to be Forever Loves forever. LizMarie got giggly, but Lee was very solemn. 'Til Death do us part, she said to both of us. Forever and ever, Amen.

I turn the car off, now. Spin the rings on my finger. Across the street, our neighbor's house flickers, shines, and sings. In our neighborhood, so many houses are dark tonight. Just a few, here and there, have cars in the driveway, cars in the street. Whole families, gathered, and their homes look alive in bright halos of light. Our neighbor has lights, but no cars. I chew the insides of my cheeks and I pull the threads in my pocket and think, well—I might just sneak over, tuck my hippo in her crib.

Superbowl Monday

Bro. Walking your dog, just so you know—just want you to know that, well, he's not starving or shitting all over your shit or even feeling one single iota of unloved. So don't worry about that. Which is not to say he don't miss you, Bro. Because he do. Just don't want you worrying about Poe of all things so I'm letting you know: Ma's been feeding him all along but this morning she just drove over and picked up old Poe-Poe. I'm at home now. I mean, I'm out walking just right this second. But I'm staying at home. So I'll be the on-duty dog-walker. No sweat. Just 'til you're back. Just want you to know, Bro: I got this.

Hey, some fucking game, right? I mean, we haven't even talked about it. How's that possible? In *what world* is that possible? This shit is fucked, dude. Wish I'd have been there. I mean, not at the Superdome. But, yeah. In New Orleans. With you, right? During. And after. When he returned that kickoff? I was like, *day-umm*. A hundred and eight's a lotta yards, Bro. God*damn* that felt good. Anywho. Poe just had a good little shit here. You know, he's getting a bit—what's the word—incontinent? Good job, Poe-Poe. Old Poe-Poe Five-Oh. And anyway, what I'm trying to say is: we've got our fingers crossed, Bro. That bullshit that girl's saying? Assault? Not my brother. Not Mr. Perfecto. And the thing about the thing? And your keys? That's some shit. I mean, I've got my fingers crossed, Bro. And your paws crossed, right, Poe? Just hold tight. Damn, "hold tight." Stupid thing to say. Sorry. Hey, just—I'll talk to you soon, so—much

love, Bro. So much love. And—but I guess I'll just tell you when I see you. Which I'm sure will be soon. Fingers crossed, yeah? Well, okay, then.

I know, I know. Pretty fucked to keep calling, right? I mean, no doubt your phone is on a shelf somewhere, in a shoebox, maybe. With your clothes and your shoes—and your, what'dye call them? Your Croakies? And your belt and your wallet and maybe even that little tie bar I gave you for Christmas. Though who wears a tie bar to a game, right? I mean, really? But maybe, I don't know. Maybe you do. But I keep thinking about that tie bar, actually, and how we all just about pissed our pants when you sent out your list. Fancy dress socks, you wanted. Um, okay, Ma says, reading your list off her phone. Pop just saying Ha! to each thing she reads off. Ha! Ha ha. "Here's a sock," Pop says. Holding up his fist. Stupid fucker. Fucking Pop. Then the tie bar, you wanted. Which I thought at first might be a rack for some ties, but I guess not. A squash racquet. *What?* Some specific *quarter-zip* Patagonia sweater. And I'm like, since when do you play squash? And should I get you some balls, while I'm at it? And an Adam Jones jersey, you said, which I thought, ok, now *there's* my brother. But I couldn't afford it. So I bought you the tie bar. Oh, and hooked you up with some dank-ass nuggz, Bro. Don't forget. But anyway. Okay. Here's the thing about a tie bar. Nothing wrong with it. With being the kind of guy that wears a tie bar. But still. And what kind of family asks their grown-ass sons to write Christmas lists? Not that I'm complaining. Got me a month of rent outta that shit. But. Do you think that's part of the problem? One of the problems? I've been thinking about that, since your shit went down. Look, I hope it's okay if I tie up old Pokey, here. Old Hokey Pokey. Dip in this store for a mo. Call

you back, Bro. Gonna get me some—well, YOLO, right? And I could use a smoke. Like a *real* smoke, I mean, like an honest-to-God hand-rolled little Bali Shag J. It's been a little bit stressful, Bro, not gonna lie. Not gonna lie, Bro. Ma and Pop are stressing the fuck out, calling all their Who-Knows-Whos. Cause look—hey. Look, just gonna pop in here a sec. This is why you quit, right? So the first cig back chills you way the fuck out. You quit so you can start again. Hey. Don't look at me, Bro. You started it. You were supposed to be the stress-free son, Mr. Perfect. Now look at me. Walking your dog, getting all wrang up about it.

Me again, big fucking surprise. I keep forgetting how old Poeski's getting, Bro, I mean, we're just walking, dude, just to the pharmacy, not really that far. And this little guy is *wiped*, Bro. Straight-up knackered. So we're taking a break, here, just sitting. Thought I'd call. I mean. I'm just—well. Remember when you got him? Poe-Poe? You got that dog book in your stocking, and you—you might not remember this, dude, but you just ripped out of the room, bro, you just totally fucking *knew*. Like you had dog-dar. Like gay-dar? But for dogs? Ree-oo-ree-oo. Your little siren went off. That was that Christmas when we had all that snow and the Ravens was new in town so when the dog was black you were like—boom—there's the name, little Raven, little E. A. Poe-Poe, jumping around, frickkin' *bounding*, yo. Sneezing in the snow, snuffling all over the place. Peeing every three seconds. Making his little yellow pee-holes in the snow. And, dude, how'd I never think of that? Pissing in the snow. Took a puppy to teach me how to use my dick, dude. And we'd stay out there for hours. Him herding the hedges. Us building snow dogs. Remember? And snowmen. Remember those snowmen we

painted? You know, with those, uh, watercolors, I think they were? It took forever. Dipping on those stupid little trays. We put an O's jersey, on mine, and a Ravens, on yours. The Ripken era, right? Before Cal broke the streak. And we painted your snowman's skin brown. For Ray Lewis. And I remember you asked—you were always asking all these fucking questions—you asked, "Why are all the snowmen white guys?" And I remember thinking, huh, I'd never thought of that before. And we only finished his front, so *our* Ray Lewis, dude, he had that—what do you call it when your skin loses pigment? Melanoma? No. Winnebago? Vitiligo? Ray Lewis had some serious vitiligo, that winter. That was some ugly-ass shit, my friend. Ma's got a picture, somewhere. The Ravens a brand-new team. Old Ray, just fresh out of college. Now twice Superbowl Champs, brah. Ray Lewis, man. Retired. The end of an *era*. "Nevermore," as they say. Right, Poe? Hard to believe, right? Twelve years ago, that first time? Remember when we were out on the driveway, shooting off fireworks? And Old Lady next door called the cops? Ma was so pissed, us new to the neighborhood. Pop, with his big job. Ma doing her best to make us all fancy. Made us write a letter to Old Lady Next Door, something to say, more or less, hey, sorry for being kids. I wrote—remember this? "Dear Old Lady Who Lives in a Shoe." Remember? That's what we called her? And then I wrote: "Your shoe stinks." Fucking Shakespeare, am I right? And you laughed so hard, sealed it up before Ma ever read it. But she sniffed something was up, Ma did. Like Ma always do. And she opened it up, got so pissed. Made me return those new sneakers I'd got, some stupid things with a pump or some lights or some wheels or some shit. Whatever stupid sneaker I was into. And I had to shovel her driveway, when we got that big snow. Remember how cold it was that year? How you brang me hot chocolate? Are you warm

enough? I'm worried you're not warm enough, Bro. Hey. Hey, hey—Poe's got something in his mouth. Chicken bone, looks like. Drop it! Fuck. Fucking *fuck*, Poe! Fucking Baltimore. Hey, look—fuck. I'll call you right back.

No worries, dude. All is well. All is copa-fuckin-setic. Took care of that bone with the *quickness*, yo. And, hey, anyway, remember you got that stuffed gorilla for Christmas that time? Called him Mr. Bananaman? I was thinking of him. Just last night. Or, this morning, I guess. Ma called, after you called her. Woke my ass up. Swear to God, I was having a dream, Mr. Bananaman was pounding his chest. But his fists was little human fists. He made not a fucking sound, Bro. Hey, remember when you were five and I was seven? You had your hair buzzed short, all No. 3 stubble. Wore a big t-shirt and you tucked in your knees and you rolled around the house like that. You'd roll up and say—you'd say, "Hedgehog needs medicine." In this tiny-ass voice. And I was like supposed to give you a Skittle or something. You always wanted the red ones. Remember? Said they gave you "blood strength." Whatever that means. Wish I knew. Remember that? You were a weird little dude, Bro. I love you, man. I love you. Is all I'm trying to say, I guess.

Miranda keeps calling, Bro. She keeps saying, "I've got Xanax, I've got Xanax." And I keep saying, "Girl, chill out, it's all gonna be cool." And she's like, "He's your fucking *brother*, Mikey." And I'm like, "Yeah, uh, I think I *know* that." You remember Miranda? It's like, a situation, though, because—never told you this—should've, but I didn't—well, she got pregnant and we got rid of it and now she feels like shit about it.

And I'm like, yeah, Baby, rubbing her feet and all that? But then a few weeks into *that* shit, her tune changes. From a fucking *wah wah* to a *hey hey*—and she's all like, I think I need to be a mother and I'm like, am I having fucking déjà vu? Cause now she wants us to try again—as if we were fucking *trying* before—and I'm like now I'm like, uh, no thank you, I mean, I need to get *my* shit together. And getting a kid to watch? Is not gonna do it. I'd been wanting to talk, you know? To you. About all this. But you had the job at the *dealership*. And you're all *career*, now. And this is serious, too. I know that. But not in the way that you're serious, Bro. And now your shit happens and Miranda's all like, "Family's all you *got*." And she's like, saying that shit, and I'm like *crying*, man. So I tell her I got to go. And now I'm out here with Poe and I'm calling you. And you need help but I need *your* help. And you—but you got bigger fish to fry. I'm sorry. God, I'm—but I'm like, I'm sure your battery is dying. And then fucking what? And you're sitting in some cell with Who Knows Who—and I know you're holding it down, Bro. I mean, no doubt. But I keep saying to myself—I keep saying it and saying it, so I might as well say it: What if I'd have been there? When you said, "Don't worry, Bro. I've got my name and my phone number written on my arm." What if, instead of laughing, I'd gone and been the big brother? Gone and thought a little. If I'd said, "That's fucked up, Sean." Huh? I think I *did* say, "That's fucked, Bro." But I laughed, too. So that's on me. But, hey, I mean, I was like, dude, chill. It's the *Superbowl*. He's a grown-ass man. And this shit? I mean, this Harbaugh Harbrawl Superbowl thing? Fucking bash brothers? Might not happen again. "Have a great fucking time, Bro." That's all I said. And then the *game*, man. The fucking blackout, and then it's all just falling apart. We're up by a billion and then—boom—we're getting

the shit fucking Kaepernickked out of us, brah. The power surge. The Niners, surging. Somehow it holds together, man. That last goal line stand. Old Ray Lewis, man. Murderer redeemed, Bro. Rehabilitated. Standing on that field, the ultimate fucking bounce-back. Champs hat on, one more time. And then the fucking confetti. And then Old Ray, he's crying. Fuck. I'm fucking tearing up now, Bro. I mean—like Sizzle say: Ball so hard, Bro. Fuck fuck fuck. I should've been there. Should've been there, right there beside you.

Nobody leaves fucking voicemails no more. I'm like—well, I'm like, what's the fucking point? But just one last thing, Bro. Just to take this to completion. Remember when you slept in that phone booth in Paris? I mean, *I* don't remember it. *I* wasn't there. But all I'm saying is: that was fucked up. Who was gonna say it, though? Pop wasn't gonna. Ma just wanted to talk about *Paris, Paris,* like you'd grown a pair of wings or something, bringing her that fancy jar of French whatever-it-was, telling your stories about passing out in phone booths. Flying around, country to country. Remember when you came home for Christmas and you gave me that hug? How I flinched when your palm hit my back? And I said, "Wanna see my stab wound?" We make jokes about this shit. Because what else can you do? You turned to Poe—good old Poeski. Who misses the shit out of you, by the way. You crouched down and you scratched his ears and you said to Poe, said, "He's joking, right? Please tell me he's joking." And I said, "No, Bro. I got fucking *stabbed* last weekend." And you were shaking your head and I pulled up my shirt and there was the gauze and you flipped your shit. You flipped your shit and you pressed me against the wall and you were all like, who fucking did it, Mikey? What

the fuck and fuck this and shit that, and, well—I thought that was just great. So I peeled the gauze down and said, I think I said something like, "Check this shit out, it's a fucking *gorge*." And there it was. My fucking third eye. And you thought I'd really been stabbed. For a second, that was awesome, there. You, home from *Paris*, flipping your shit about *me*. That was the year you got taller. You went off to Paris and you came home, two inches taller, some crazy late growth spurt. And I'm just the same old Mikey. And you? You assume I'd just went and I'd started some fight and got stabbed over some stems or some shit. That was awesome, not gonna lie, Bro. You crying on that chair, there. My gauze, just dangling. And then Ma goes off about how long a trip you'd had and how you'd slept on the floor of some airport named after a seagull and how could I do that and Pop doesn't even look up from his crossword. Just says, "Shit. If *I* let a cyst on my back explode? I wouldn't be fucking parading it." All I'm saying is—why am I saying all this? I guess it's just—well, what did you do? Here I am, I'm a fucking asshole. Pretend I got stabbed. And you just say, you know, your head in your hands, talking through your fingers, you say, "What the fuck, Mikey?" And you looked so distressed. And so then I explained. You know. You know how I don't like to go to the doctor. So I just shrug and I say—all embarrassed, now—how I was out at the gym? You know, doing some crunches, pretty standard. And this stupid, like, pimple thing explodes on my back and it's not a big deal, and I, like, don't think it's a big deal or anything. So I don't do nothing about it. And then it gets *infected* and then they had to go in and they sliced that shit out. And you know I hate doctors, man. So you just taped me back up. Rearranged my shirt. You just hugged me, just holding my shoulders now. Said, "God, Mikey. Why didn't you call?" You just said that. Cause you were the one

who was there that time, way in the way-back-when. When they did that thing in my ear and I was screaming out and screaming out and they were like, "It's just going to feel like a little bit of pressure." And the babysitter, she was like, "It's just water, dude. Be brave, little guy." And it hurt so fucking bad and I couldn't stop crying and they kept squirting that shit in and, well—hey!—turns out they'd ruptured my fucking ear drum. So when you saw that shit? On my back? *You* knew why I let it get bad. And *you* know why I made it a joke. And you just hugged me, and then, Bro? Mr. Perfecto, swooping in to the rescue. You swabbed that shit out. Every day you were home. Pouring that stuff in and watching it foam, saying, "Jesus, Bro. Doesn't that fucking *hurt*?" And you hurting more than me, using the Q-tip in my back. And so what, right? Well, why am I saying this? I guess what I'm saying is, sometimes I used to dream, you know, about some other childhood. In some other universe. Where *I* wasn't the fuckup. How great that would be. Well, careful what you wish for, 'cause—let me tell you something: it's not. It's not great at all. Now I'm like—fuck—I mean, Jesus, Bro. *Why the fuck am I out here. And you're in there?* And I keep calling. And calling. So I can just hear your voice. What I need is—well? What I fucking need is *your fucking face*, Bro. Need to put my hands on it. Rub your head and give you a fucking—what? A fucking Skittle. And then this old dog, dude. Poe and I. We've been walking this shit. We've been walking it *out*, yo. And he just—he just *collapsed*, brother. I can't say he sat, Bro. More like, his legs give out. It's fucking cold, Bro. And he's *done*, dude. Is what I'm saying. And we're just sitting here, and I'm not sure he's gonna make it home. If I kill your fucking dog, dude? With you—well—stuck in there? I swear, I'll fucking kill myself. And, Bro? I'm just—I'm gonna have to go now. Poe's shivering, now. He's got the shakes or something. I

think I'm gonna hafta carry him. Hey, Jesus? (I can still call you that. I can still fucking call you that.) Remember that New Year's when your girlfriend was hysterical and there wasn't a cab in the whole fucking city? You just hung her over your shoulder. And, Bro? You just started walking. You walked all the fuck home, Bro. And I walked all the way with you. Offered to help. You know. All Sam to your Frodo. She was drunk off her shit, Bro. But she wouldn't let me touch her. She was *conscious enough to forbid me to touch her*. I keep thinking about the way you said, the way you asked me, fresh home from Paris: "Why didn't you call, Bro?" I keep thinking about your phone. How I keep pressing zero. *Press zero to continue.* Your phone, buzzing in that box. Me pressing zero. That box on the shelf. And I keep calling, Bro, and every time I call I think, one of these times I'm gonna call, I'm gonna call, Bro, but sooner or later—you know what, Sean-O? Mr. Perfecto. I'll call you, Bro. And your fucking phone? It's gonna fucking kill me, Bro. I'll call and your phone will be dead.

How Much Would You Like to Wager?

Here's what I'll say to him, I'll say: Well, Alex, that actually *is* a funny story.

I *do* have a dog, and my dog's name is Spike. As in Golden Spike, as in he's a golden retriever-ish born a year ago today. I know, right? Crazy.

It was May 10th, 2012. When we saw the pregnant dog that was your mama, Spike-o. When we were having the family meeting at Dairy Queen and Dad said, "C'mon, Jill. A puppy's the least we can do." And we all agreed to share responsibility so I got you and named you Spike because it was the one hundred and forty-third anniversary of the Transcontinental Railroad completion, in case you didn't know that. But don't feel bad about not knowing because I'm going to be on *Jeopardy!* so I'm supposed to know and you being a little stupider shouldn't make you feel bad, I mean, people always say why do I have to know how to do these fractions? And I say, well, because someday you might need to know how to split an eight-slice pizza between three people. But you probably won't need to know about the Transcontinental Railroad unless you live in Utah or something. Which you probably don't, because their population is like less than three million. Sorry, I just—sometimes I can't help myself, I mean, I just know *a lot*. Anyways. Blah blah blah. *You* know "sit" and you know "stay" so you're doing fine by me. But here's the thing, Spikes: I'm going to California tomorrow which unfortunately means I will miss your birthday. But, upside: by the time I come back I'll be rich! Which means? Bones! Bonesbonesbones. Yes. And going shopping for school supplies and no one says, no, that binder is too much and, here, take these pencils with the bad erasers that leave a smear on your page. One kid made forty nine thousand which

should be enough to get another dog, right, Spiky? For Dad's place, because I think he must be lonely which I know because I saw how important it was for him to watch the Victoria's Secret fashion show. You weren't there but I asked him if I earned enough if we could do it. And he said dogs are very expensive but whatever yeah. And even though he didn't think I could do it, I took the *Jeopardy!* test online for kids, and we can name that dog Alex when I win which works for a boy or a girl. You know Alex Trebek used to have a mustache? Every time Dad makes scrambled eggs on Sundays he's always saying certain things like hot sauce will put hair on my chest. Which is gross and I definitely don't want a mustache either even though it's okay for a boy. But I guess we don't always get to choose, do we, Spike? Because mom has to use that cream on her upper lip to make her hairs less dark and I live in fear of those hairs which would only make things worse and things for me, facewise, are already pretty, well, *not great*. And do you know what a mustache ride is? A kid at school told me what a mustache ride was, but I don't believe I'll ever want anyone to do that and I don't know why anyone would but I guess I have to know these things even though they won't be on *Jeopardy!* because everything about everything is good to know, even the gross things. And like Mom says, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger" which is a German quote from Nietzsche which is hard to spell but I can. So get off my dress, please, because I need to finish packing so I can go and conquer the world with my brain ha ha and did you know each groove in the brain is called a sulcus? And when I get back and we have tons of money? We'll do that thing I did with Dad that time when we stuck a dollar bill on a fishing hook and put it in the middle of the path and then when someone tried to pick it up we reeled in the dollar. But this time we'll use a Benjamin which is *a hundred dollars* and the line

won't get stuck in a bush and we won't have to leave the fishing pole and run because that guy was real mad. That's how much money we'll have. And we'll sign Mom up for cheese of the month and for Pilates class so she can have her cheese and eat it too ha ha and not get fat. And I'll get my braces which unfortunately will be after I'm on TV and maybe there will be enough to go to college on and someday I'll go to college and you will die and I will come home and I'll take a road trip to Utah with my husband in our airplane and I'll scatter your ashes there but not before I train you to become a champion agility dog like we saw on TV, right? I *am* sorry you have to go to the kennel and I hope you don't get kennel cough but that's just what you have to do because Dad says he has company this weekend and even though Mom says you were his idea and he should share responsibility he has company so unfortunately you have to go. That's just the price you have to pay, I guess, so I can go win the money that will pay for your kennel and put kibble in your bowl, okay? We'll be back soon though and they'll be plenty of time for birthday roll-the-ball when I come home and I'll have enough money and I'll buy dipped cones for everyone at Dairy Queen. Like the olden days when Mom and Dad shared one cone even though I'll have enough money for two and it will all be okay. Hey, Goldilocks. Look at me. Spike. Do you trust me? Listen to me now—ew, gross, no licking! Listen: I promise to Make It a True Daily Double, Alex.

And I'm gonna get it *right*.

Sun's Out, Guns Out

It's ninety-five degrees and the air is thick and sticky—the world in a great glass jar, it seems, of amber-colored seven-pepper jelly. The kind Poynter's Mama makes; the kind she served, just a few hours ago, with Poynter's biscuit breakfast. Boyd Poynter, Lance Corporal with the United States Marine Corps, stands in the prow of his father's motorboat. The lake provides the only relief from the heat; there, you can make your own breeze. Poynter loops around it, trying to remember: is it *nucular* or *nuclear*? He's heard it both ways. The stacks of the power plant fall away on his right. Once it became a joke, Poynter couldn't remember, ever, which of the two words was the punch line.

The war's here, too; but mostly over there, for now. Lance Corporal Boyd Poynter is home on leave from Afghanistan. It's early afternoon on the Fourth of July, full sun on the deck of the S. S. Peach Pie. Poynter wears his plush NASA helmet. He'd had to grab the edges and tear a bit, but the head hole's big enough now. Boyd Poynter went to Space Camp, back in fifth grade. His favorite dehydrated food was strawberry ice cream. His favorite astronaut was—and still is—Michael Collins.

Neil Armstrong? Buzz Aldrin? Those guys can go suck a nut.

Poynter speaks into the velvet-covered mike attached to his plush NASA space helmet. "Houston, come in." If he slows down, even a little, the humidity attacks every pore on his body. Every hair, every nostril, every toe. Poynter revs the engine, slings the boat around Lake Norman. Swimmers bob here and there, laughing happily, lying in their noodles like casual IEDs. IEDs can be anywhere. In boats. In bats. On pizza delivery boys. In breast implants, travelling undetected. NTCC. Never trust a chicken

cutlet. Poynter lifts one arm, silver can in hand. "Statue of Liberty, reporting for duty. Houston, come in, Houston." The heat ripples around him like silk. If he stops, the silk sticks. Poynter tilts the can and beer streams back, super realistic, super flame-like. Poynter lets go of the can, twists to watch his torch fly. He watches as it clears the stern, just missing the girl. The girl is Jules. Jules leans against her vinyl seat, hands behind her head. With her sunglasses on, it's nearly impossible to tell if she's awake. If she's even alive. Without touching them, it's nearly impossible to tell if her breasts are real. Poynter loves the feel of the heat on his bare body, the wind on his sweat. He doesn't mind the helmet. That, Poynter's used to.

"Houston. This is Collins." Poynter's on autopilot. The lake seems to steer him around, seems to have its own gravity. Poynter imagines a giant drain at the bottom of the lake—after all, that's what the lake was built for. Poor Michael Collins. Sad fuck stuck in the command module. Buzz and Neil just out there, leaping around on the moon. Well, Poynter's been to his own lunar landscape.

Poynter's brothers are still on shore. Playing their endless game of cornhole. Tossing their little beanbag sacks, racking up the points.

Collins in the command module, getting his rocks off adjusting the volume. Making sure the transmission to Earth goes through. Poor little dude, Poynter thinks. Takes one step for man, by not taking it. "Hey, it's cool," Collins says. "I'll just sit here and cover your ass. No biggie." The S. S. Peach Pie makes a wide, banking turn in one of the coves. Lake Norman is like one of those seahorses, the ones disguised as seaweed. Lots of wavering branches, lots of innies, lots of outies. Poynter slows the boat, waves at a boat full of neighbors. He holds his hand to his ear, uses his other arm to shrug. "Can't

hear you," he shouts, certain that they can't hear him. Poynter has a long stretch of the lake ahead of him. There's the thousand thankless tasks, for a guy like Collins. When Collins gets old, who changes his diapers? Is he called a hero, too? Does he go to the VA for his reentry therapy? The thankless tasks. Cleaning the sand out of the gun, so the gun won't misfire. Just Do It. Do it so you've got Maria's back. If there'd been a gun in space, they wouldn't have stayed in space very long. Poynter pictures a punctured balloon. Would they? Wouldn't have they. Wouldn't they have. Grammar was never Poynter's best subject. *I before E except after C or when sounding like A as in neighbor and weigh. Neither ancient foreign financier seized either species of weird leisure or forfeited their height in Raleigh.* Always exceptions. He learned that once. Funny how these things stick around. If there'd been a gun in space, Poynter supposes they would have stayed in space forever, now that he thinks about it. Stayed in space, dead. Is the space shuttle an armored vehicle? Michael Collins, an American flag sewed to his shoulder, and what about his mother? And Poynter's mother, talk about thankless tasks, cooking three square meals, not to mention all the dishes? What about her? Fried chicken of your wet dreams. Boyd Poynter's mother who was out the door this morning, before the engine had even stopped running. She'd heard him coming, like a dog would. Across the lawn and up the driveway, ran Boyd Poynter's Mama, past the Dodges and Fords he didn't recognize; his Dad's white Escalade, windows tinted like a rapper's. And then there was his brother's truck, Hunter's, and then Poynter was was moving toward his mother, the truck-bed filled with something under a tarp—explosives, fireworks, likely. Up the hill she churned, and he was heading down, past his other brother's Mustang; Hutton's, camo green with a camel-colored top. Poynter's mother who hurtled forward—

forward motion, yes, but with an up-down like a shuttle moving through a loom, so her knee must be giving her trouble again. Poynter winced as his mother's bare feet smashed into the gravel. She was on him, then, tried to grab him; but he grabbed her first, picked her up and held her above the driveway. "Biscuit!" she said, though her words seemed drowned in warm butter and her smell of flour and bacon fat. He said to her, "Now, Mama. Where are your shoes?" She pressed her face on his shirt and he held her until she stopped crying. She sniffed, looked over his shoulder and said, patting her face with her hands, looking at Jules, said, "Now, who's this?"

The girl, her hair streaming in the wind like a pirate flag, applies suntan lotion around the black triangles on her chest, down to the black triangle between her stomach and her bare legs. Not that she has any stomach to speak of. "Woo-eee," Poynter's father had whistled, when she came out of the house in her two-piece. Boyd Poynter's father is a wealthy man, runs a textile mill just outside of Charlotte. Boyd Poynter's father's mill is one of the few surviving mills. All the cotton's in India, now. Well, Boyd Poynter's father is One Smart Mother; he grows his cotton in India, too. Blowjobs are cheap, in India. Or, that's what Poynter's brothers say. One line left, back here, back stateside. With the *Grown and Handloomed in America* tag that doesn't say, can't say, *by Americans*. Boyd Poynter's father can suck it. He's learned not one word of Spanish, just walks around that factory stumping his chestnut cane, saying things to Poynter and Poynter's brothers like, "Ask that one to bring me a lemonade." "Ask that one if his ass is as hairy as his arms are." "Tell that one"— he calls them "his Mexicans"—"tell that one her hair's so pretty we might could just weave a special—never mind, I'll tell her myself." He'd put his hand in her hair, say "bonita" like it's the

dirtiest word in the world. "Go on," he'll say to the boys. *Vámanos.* Which he thinks means, "Scram." And Poynter's mother, sending him an egg salad sandwich in his lunch every day. Well, one day Poynter couldn't take it anymore. The trip to India was looming. Ha—looming. But Poynter didn't want to go to India. He wanted to be an astronaut. That not being an option, Boyd Poynter left home under cover of darkness. Now there's a Tom Clancy phrase. Under cover of darkness, Boyd Poynter joined the Marines. Made his mother cry. Made her cry again, today, too.

He slows the boat down, way down, zig-zags it. "You're wearing your hero suit," his Mama always says when they Skype. As if he's five and it's a set of those footed pajamas, the ones with rubber on the bottom and a zipper running from neck to ankle. The ones Poynter had worn past the point of too-small, until the day of his brother's tenth birthday sleepover party. When Hunter pointed at Poynter's crotch and said, "Look at Boyd's teeny tiny junk." Well, look who has teeny tiny junk *now*, Poynter thinks, flexing his bicep as he points out of the boat at his brother. Sun's out, guns out. He's just passing the dock. Poynter's brother points back, lifts his beer. You, they each seem to be saying to each other. No, you.

Poynter brings his beer to his face and he drinks it.

"Physical Challenge," they still always say. When Poynter's gun was blown from his hands, when he scrambled for it through the blowing dirt, when the audience was screaming in his ears? Poynter heard his brother's voice, heard Hunter's voice say, like he had, when he'd been on that game show, heard him say, calm and confident: "We'll take the Physical Challenge." On *Family Double Dare*, Hunter was the one who found

the three orange flags hidden in the layers of the giant hamburger. Poynter found his gun, and his hands, and the trigger.

Poynter pulls the boat into a cove. He takes out his rod, fumbles with the tackle box.

His first cast misfires. Poynter steadies his hands, takes deep breaths. He casts again, stands there. He won't catch anything today. It's too hot and the fish are at the bottom. Shitting and swallowing each other. Swallowing and shitting.

The girl says, "What're we fishing for?"

"Whatever," Poynter says. "Bluegill. Yellow perch. Whatever's biting."

A few minutes later, the girl says, "Nothing's biting."

"We'll try white bass," he says, and sips his beer. Doesn't change his lure. Casts again. "Redeye," he says. "Greenfin." He takes a long sip and looks at her. She'd been so much interesting, last night at the bar. "Purple feathertail," he says.

Finally, she says, "You're shitting me."

"Yes, ma'am, I am. Thought you were asleep back there."

"I'm not tired."

Last night they went back from the bar to her place. He'd run into her there. At the bar where she worked. She recognized him, remembered his name. Poynter made her crawl. "It's all in good fun," she said. When they finished, he lay, stomach down, on her bed. He was supposed to drive straight to the lake house. His family was waiting. She lay down on top of his back. He thought she want feats of strength, that she'd make him do pushups. Instead, like a line from a dream, she just said, "At ease."

Poynter stands there for five minutes, ten minutes, waiting on a nibble, drinking from his beer. He can feel her eyes behind her lenses going up and down his side, over the skull tattoo that's wearing a helmet; over the American flag on his shoulder; over the nine planets lining one side of his spine. It had been hard for him to pick whether to have Mercury near his head or near his waistband. Poynter has yellow hair, though. That had decided it. His head is the sun. "That's a metaphor," an ex-girlfriend told him. Mr. Center of the Universe. Mr. Universe. Poynter flexes his pecs. *Mary's Violet Eyes Make John Sit Up, Nights, Pining. My Very Eager Member Jumps Straight Up Norah's Pussy.* Except Pluto no longer exists. Or, its gravity's too small. Something. On Mars, there's a small creature, a rabbit. "Eh, pardon me, Doc," the rabbit says. "But could you rent me a U-drive-'em flying saucer? I gotta get back to the Earth." And Marvin the Martian says, "Earth? Oh, the Earth will be gone in just a few seconds. There's about to be," the Martian says, "and Earth-shattering kaboom." Poynter throws his can into the water and belches. The can is a flashbang. The fish, disoriented, will float to the surface. Maybe a purple feathertail, this time. Maybe the purple feathertail, if it comes, will be an IED in disguise.

The girl is moving. The girl is getting up. Poynter sticks his rod in the pro-anchor rod holder. He opens the cooler. "Want one?" he says.

"Yeah, I want one." He tosses, and the girl can catch. She takes the beer, rolls the can down her shoulders, slowly. She shakes it up and pops it open and it spurts out of her hand, pale and fizzy and strong. She walks up to him, stands near him, doesn't touch. Sips what's left of her beer. The girl twists the wire mike of the plush NASA space

helmet. Sticks it in her mouth. His plush NASA space helmet. Her hands are retying the top tie of her swimsuit. Or untying?

"What are you doing?" Poynter says.

Her lips around the tip of the mike. The girl says, "What do you think I'm doing?" She slides the mike into her mouth. Her face moves closer to his.

"What do *you* think you're doing?" Poynter says. He feels ridiculous. Trapped.

The girl moves her lips up and down on the mike, her eyes looking for his. She reaches for the waistband of his shorts. But she's just another dumb fish on a worm and he closes his eyes and he tries to be interested in this fish, tries to be the worm that wants to get caught. She's touching him but his anger rises like a limb, instead, and it says, loud, "Don't touch me." She pulls her hands out, lifts them up. Backs away. Poynter tosses his helmet in the prow of the boat. Wipes his hair down. Wipes his face.

Poynter presses the skin on his chest, says, "I think I'm sunburnt."

He picks up his rod, sends out another cast.

"You're not catching anything," she finally says. She sits back in her seat, sunglasses down again. "What's wrong with you? I mean, respectfully. Captain."

"Lance Corporal," he says. The girl sighs.

If Poynter slows down, even a little, the humidity takes over. He revs the engine, slings the boat around the lake.

Another loop around and he's practically alone again. He draws a loop around the lake and then another; because this is what he misses when he's OCONUS, when he's in country. They have sand, but no water; which eliminates the pleasures of sand. No

ghost crabs, no sandy seashells, no backs of thighs covered in the stubbly sandskin, no line where the sand abruptly stops and tan begins. Women in Afghanistan don't have thighs, as far as he can tell. Most homes pay for a water carrier. In Kabul, only 15% of homes, Poynter said to his brother, have piped water. His brother had been filling the coffeepot. What percentage have thighs? Where are the thighs? Except for Maria. Maria has thighs. But Maria's Maria. He made her promise to take care of her thighs, when he left. He hopes that she is. He can't go back, if there's ever no Maria. Playing spades in the shade. Just a grunt like the rest of them. The best. Gruntier, even. She actually grunts. Farts. They make each other laugh. That's enough.

Poynter props one leg up on the steering wheel, begins to steer the boat with his foot. He is an attractive male driving a powerful boat with his foot. His plush NASA space helmet is there on the floor, and he misses it. "I'm Washington Crossing the Delaware," he shouts, leaning into the wind. He grips the hot wheel with his toes, moves it to the right, moves it to the left. He should have been in the circus, Maria always says. He should be on water skis. He has perfect balance. His balance is impeccable. He sways to the left, then to the right. But it's on purpose.

"Honey," the girl says.

"No, no, Jules, it's cool." He sways again, putting his arms into it. "It's cool." He points to his shoulder. "I'm a like a flag. Bend," he says. "Never break. Flap. Never flag."

"How can a flag never flag?" she says.

"Never mind." The word he'd been looking for was *falter*. Poynter's mother's favorite phrase is "Semper Gumby." Flexible. He flexes his pecs. She picked it up on a

Marine moms message board. MMMB. "I am the WMD," he says. "Kaboom!" There actually is a dude, Poynter remembers. William Michael Donnelly. Who can actually say that. Poynter met the guy at Camp Lejeune. Then there's the MWDs. Military Working Dogs. Biscuit had been Boyd's dog, when Boyd was six and seven. Boyd and Biscuit had been peanut butter and jelly. His mother would throw the ball and both Boyd and Biscuit would run for it. His mother had gotten them confused, or it had been a game; she called them both Biscuit, and both of them answered.

"Y'all are two of the dumbest dogs," Hunter would say.

"Hey, look," Hutton said. "Chicken and Biscuit."

"Don't slobber me!" (Either of them said, all the time.)

His father would ask, "What'd you do today, son?"

Boyd would paw his toes and say, "Biscuit saw a rabbit and he chased it but he couldn't catch it."

"Why are you all muddy, son?"

"Biscuit went down to the bridge and slipped and fell cause of all them leaves."

"*Those* leaves."

"Yes, Mama."

"What happened to your church shoes, son?"

"Biscuit didn't know it was gonna rain."

"That Biscuit's got shit for brains is what I think."

When Daddy ran the dog over with the truck, Boyd jumped out of the truck and ran to where Biscuit had his mouth open as wide as it could go, open to make the biggest noise, that horrible sucking noise through the blood, and then there was the worse noise,

when Daddy had lifted his boot and stomped on Biscuit's neck and the noise had stopped then, except for Boyd, and his mama crying, saying, "Oh, now why'd you have to do it that way?" And Daddy had thrown down his hat and said, "God*damn* that dog!"

And now the girl says, "Take us in, Poynt."

And Poynter says, "Just one more loop, Babe."

He passes the dock and there's even more people there, and he thinks, maybe *two* loops. Maybe two beers. His brothers are sitting there. Dangling from the end of the dock, just straight watching him.

That morning, when Poynter's mother had rushed from the house—when Poynter had set his mama in the grass—Poynter noticed the eyes of his father in the window. Everyone looked at Jules. "You remember Jules," Poynter said. "From high school." Jules said, "Hi." Poynter had noticed, for the first time, the blue petals under her eyes. He thought her face looked like one of those flowers that opens at night; that forgets, every night, that, yes, the sun has gone away. But he'll be back. The sun always comes back.

"Something's burning," his dad yelled, from the house.

"Something's burning," Poynter said.

"Oh," Mama said, flapping her towel dismissively. "Something's always burning."

The bacon wasn't burnt, though.

His brothers did make it down when they smelled breakfast.

* * *

The lake is at its peak capacity. Poynter will have to be careful. He opens another beer.

Every time they picked teams for games, his older brothers picked each other. Hunter, Hutton, and Boyd. Leftover. One time, the family went to Universal Studios, Florida. "Let's get on one of those Nickelodeon shows," Hutton said. "Lame," Hunter said. But when their family got chosen, when they really *did* get to go on *Family Double Dare*? "Only four players," the man in the official Double Dare t-shirt said. "Two parents. Two kids." "Do your family proud," Poynter's father said, hands on Poynter's shoulders. "Don't be misbehaving in the stands." Poynter watched from the audience. Poynter watched while Hunter threw rubber fish, Hutton catching the rubber fish in his hatbowl. "We'll take the Physical Challenge." It was then that Poynter decided that he *had* to go to Space Camp. He had to feel the weightlessness, feel what it'd be like in space: as far away from fish, and fish hatbowls. As far away, *please please please*, as you could get. You can get pretty far though, even if you stay on Earth.

Afghanistan is the shape of an apple core. The little stem pointing out, east, northeast.

Hunter had asked him, today, if he wanted to play horseshoes before lunch.

"Wouldn't you rather play with Hutton?" Poynter said.

Hutton said, "I'm napping."

"I don't wanna play," Poynter said.

"Well, how bout you, Jules?" Hunter said.

So Poynter said, "Perfect. I'm going for a walk."

"Want company?" Hutton said.

"I think your wife needs you," Poynter said.

Hutton looked over to where Poynter was pointing. Hutton's wife had a wailing kid in her arms. Blood was pooling and slipping down the kid's leg. He'd been got.

"She's got that," Hutton said. And resumed his nap.

If you went behind the Poynter lake house, up the long, steep gravel driveway, took a right on Bob's Lane, walked for five minutes or so, you'd reach a minor highway. If you walked along the highway for five more minutes, taking the second right down an unmarked dirt road, you'd reach Lester Pine's house. If you climbed the boards nailed to the big tulip poplar on the right side of the house, you'd be in the tree house. Where, if you'd done this on the fourth of July, at just the right time—if your equipment was in good working order, the telescope dusted off, the lens swiped with your tshirt—if you picked the right space between the trees: you'd be able to see the lawn of the Poynter place, and the shoreline. And a girl with long black hair, pulled into a ponytail. You'd see her, hands on her hips, horseshoe in one of them, turn her head left, and then right. As if looking for something. You might've said, "Jules." Might've smiled. What else? You might've dropped to the boards, done twenty perfect pushups. Rubbed one out, worked up a little stain, on the floor. Pull a leaf from the tulip poplar. Drop it on top. Climb back down. Breathe the green air.

You might've done that.

Poynter looks at the girl, sitting in the vinyl seat. "How was horseshoes?"

"Great," the girl says.

Poynter opens another beer. Feeds it to the fishes. Says, "Want one?"

"No," the girl says. "You drink mine."

Back at the house, back from his walk, there were way more trucks in the driveway. Poynter found his mother in the kitchen. "That old tree house is still there."

"Oh," his mother said. "You went up there?"

Poynter shrugged.

"Are you having fun," she wanted to know next.

"I'm great, Mama."

"You *are* great."

"Mama."

"You're my living breathing hero."

"Mama."

"Have you spoken to Daddy yet?"

They both looked out the window, over the sink, past the old men and the young men leaning on the rail of the porch. They looked over the grass and past the women on the grass and the babies doing somersaults under the shade trees and the kids in wet swimsuits fighting each other with fists and sticks, past the unlit bonfire, to where Poynter's father was sitting in his pale blue seersucker, looking out over the water like some stoic portrait of Robert E. Lee. Poynter remembered how his Dad picked him up from school in a horse-drawn carriage, once. And how he'd been embarrassed. Until he watched and saw how Hutton and his friends howled, cracking their imaginary whips. "Get onup," Daddy said. "And giddap!"

Hutton had climbed up, stood in the seat, swung his arm around like it was holding a lasso. The girls had started whispering. The next day, Poynter asked his dad to pick them up again like that. His dad said, "No. It's not a surprise if it's not a surprise."

Poynter doesn't like surprises. They're everywhere.

"Never speak 'til you're spoken to," Poynter said. "You taught me that."

"Also told you to floss. Cut these onions," his Mama said. "And take a shower, good Lord, before your Grandmother gets here."

Poynter's been on the boat for a while now, needs another shower. Maybe he could sneak the girl in—

They were swinging past the dock again; and now his mother out there, waving him in.

"I think she said something about pie," the girl said.

"What?" Poynter said. "You read lips?"

The sun is not straight overhead. The sun is not setting, yet, either.

The girl, she'd been adding twigs to the bonfire when Poynter ate his lunch. Poynter, freshly showered and shaved, ate his burger leaning against the rail of the deck. His plastic plate balanced beside him. A badge for his uniform, this plastic plate. What they were fighting for. Mama likes the sound of a full dishwasher, hitting all its cycles. Well, why not use plates, then? Real cutlery. Call the war off early. Bugle, the basset hound, shuffled over, looking for a handout. The sun was directly overhead. Someday, the sun would set.

It was hot, and Poynter was ready to take the boat out. He'd take the boat out and by the time he got back, the frogs would be starting to jaw. The heat would drop. He'd be hungry again. Poynter fed his scraps to the dog. Folded the dog's ears. Unfolded them. Held the dog's nose to his own. Who can stand to love a dog with such sad-looking eyes? Poynter wanted a pull of something. He took a drink from his Coke. The whiskey tasted good and it was lunchtime and it was his first day home and he watched the girl twist her hair back into a ponytail. Ponytails are not authorized hairstyles. Maria wears her hair short, like the men.

"Ooo-ee," Hutton had said to Hunter, over breakfast, over bacon and eggs and biscuits and Mama's seven-pepper jelly. Had said about some girl. It seemed like a running conversation. Hutton had howled, "Hunter's gonna *get some*."

"Who?" Poynter had said. But no one answered.

"Boys," Mama said. "We've got company."

"Don't mind me," Jules had said.

"Mind *me*," Mama said.

"How was the cleanup?" Hutton said to Hunter, ignoring their mother.

"You know," Hunter said. Took a forkful of eggs, placed it in his mouth. "Just a couple of hymen strewn around."

"Boys!"

"C'mon, Ma, I was *joking*."

"What were you *doing* last night? Nevermind," Mama said. "I don't want to know."

"It's no wonder your sister's afraid of him." This was Hutton, talking to Jules. Jules actually had not been in Poynter's grade. She'd been in Hutton's. Her sister was in Hunter's. It was all very complicated, and really, Poynter thought, what did a year or two matter?

"Ooo-ee," Hutton said again.

"Stop that," Mama said. "I don't know why y'all can't talk like decent people. Always, 'pussy this' and 'fuck that.'"

Poynter wanted to point out, no one had said those two words.

"Why can't y'all ever say something *nice*?" his Mama said.

"Like what, Mama?"

Their mother thought for a minute. Always let herself be baited. She flipped some bacon. "Like how about 'tickle her flower?'"

Hutton pounded on the table and Hunter spurted coffee. Mama said, "I hope y'all like your bacon good and *burnt*."

Poynter's brothers laughed again. But their father said, "I don't."

Poynter scratched Bugle's chin, on the deck, after lunch. He looked down to the shore. His father was still in that blue Adirondack chair. Still watching the water. The girl and the kids, Poynter's nieces and nephews and cousins, they were all adding twigs to the bonfire. At some point, the temperature would drop. The temperature would drop, eventually. A bonfire would still be unnecessary. But bearable. The girl and a cousin had walked up to the man in the seersucker suit, the man in the Adirondack chair. They held out two branched sticks. The man in the suit had shifted in his seat, reached into a pocket. He began to whittle the first of four prongs with his knife. The girl, Jules, was

laughing. The man in the seersucker suit was saying something. The cousin was on her hip and the man was talking to them, his eyes on the pocketknife.

"Y'know what I'd miss," someone said, next to Poynter.

Poynter looked at his cousin Billy. Billy was a caricature, a goofy sock puppet with a big, red grin. Billy never cut his toenails. Just tore 'em off. He'd told Poynter this, sometime back when they were in high school. Maybe tenth grade? Somehow, though—not five years after that announcement—Billy'd gotten married. Poynter had been at the wedding. "Oh, the poor girl," Poynter's mama had said.

Poynter looked at Billy, said, "Sorry. Were you talking to me?"

"Sure. Is that allowed?"

"Of course," Poynter said. Though he rather wished he could've said, "No, Billy. No, it's not."

"What I'd miss," Billy said. "Over there."

"Where?"

"You know."

"Oh," Poynter said. Run straight in, he told himself. Get it over with. "You mean Afghanistan," Poynter said.

"Yeah," Billy said. He'd been pulling on a loose grain of wood in the railing. "Over there."

What could Poynter even say? Run straight in. Don't blink. This might even be fun. "What would you miss?" Poynter said. He was almost curious. Billy was such a gross human being. What amazing thing, what glorious thing, did Billy think he would miss?

"You're gonna think it's weird."

"Oh, no," Poynter said. "I've seen weird."

"Well," Billy said. "I'd miss the jerky."

Poynter drank some Coke. "The jerky," he said.

"Yeah, you know. How do you guys live without it? Beef jerky. Turkey jerkey." He started ticking them off on his fingers. "Venison. Bunny jerky. Yeah," he said, looking away at some distant horizon. Gaze curving, somehow. Maybe to the other side of the globe? "Bunny jerky's *real* good." He was talking to himself, now. Almost whispering. "Dehydrated meat," Billy said. "That's all jerky is."

Poynter drank some Coke. Passed it to Billy. Billy drank some.

"You got that teriyaki flavor over there?"

Poynter sighed and finished his drink. "You ever had camel jerky, Billy?"

"Y'all got camel?" Billy said. "Shit, man. I'd *kill* for some camel."

Poynter watched the girl play Red Rover. Her team made a tight line across the lawn, bounced someone off. He was still on the porch. Poynter felt his grip close before he sensed that he'd sensed something. Poynter gripped the railing. Poynter would not move. He would not move, though he felt a strong desire to tear off the railing, spin it around. An instinct. From behind his right ear, Poynter sensed something coming. Felt the air move.

Felt a hand land heavy on his shoulder.

"I hear," his mother's brother said, "that you can get a tactical carrying case at the PX. Just for carrying your dip can." Huntington Hobbs. Poynter decided he would have

to take the girl. They would have to leave. Go anywhere. Anywhere with air conditioning and no voices. Huntington, on his left, was gearing up for a speech. Big Hunt. If-it-flies-it-dies Hunt. "I hear you can stick that case right on your uniform." The man in the seersucker suit was talking to the girl. He'd finished her stick, it seemed. She inspected it. Poked him with the sharp ends. He said something that looked like "Ouch!" Poynter saw the man's hands grip the arms of the chair. Then Poynter saw the man in the chair start to laugh.

On his left, Hunt bellowed on. "I hear the PX is right next to the trailer with the Green Beans Coffee. Lattes and shit. Some war, right, Boy?" He nudged Poynter.

There had been lattes. Some days. Some days—no.

Poynter shrugged his assent.

The girl took the ponytail holder out of her hair, wrapped it around the handle of her stick. The girl and the cousin planted their sticks in the ground, near the bonfire. It was, Poynter realized, the most absolutely perfect marshmallow roasting stick.

"I said, 'Some war.'"

"Some war," Poynter said. "Some war." He kicked a potato chip over the edge of the deck.

"Lattes. Must be nice." Billy'd wandered back. Now all three of them were leaning on the rail. "Why, in Nam," Hunt said, "we was once so hungry we tore all our own toenails off. Chewed on them for flavor." Oh, right. Big Hunt is Billy's dad. The toenail doesn't fall far from the toe. Ha. Poynter played a game with himself, a game he sometimes played with Maria. He forced himself to find something, anything amusing. Toenails. Toenails would do. Anyway, Hunt was lying. Hunt was lying, but Hunt

outranked Poynter, still. So Poynter took it. He'd learned how to take it. How to say, Sir, yes, Sir. He looked down to the lawn, to the girl. "I was once so hungry," Hunt said, "I really ate a girl out. Young local girl. You know. For protein." This was a lie, obviously. An egregious and revolting lie. Hunt was enjoying the memory of the lie, lying in a low voice as if it were the truth. A hush-hush truth. Now Uncle Lee shuffled up. Hunt lied on, in his low voice. As if he didn't want the women in the lawn chairs to be able to hear. Girl, this, wet cunt, that. Poynter's Coke was empty. Hunt paused to take a bite of his burger. He raised his voice and called down to the women, "Damn, ladies! This a good burger! My compliments."

"Boyd chopped the onions," Poynter's mother called up.

"Ooo-ee," Big Hunt said, nudging Poynter.

Poynter looked for the girl, looked past Hunt, looked down to his flatulent Uncle Lee. Poynter had received a video message from his mother around Easter. "Eileen has finally left your Uncle Lee. I tried going over. I brought him a big ham. I was thinking he could just eat the ham. I thought he might be hungry. No one answered the door so I looked in the window and I saw—I saw that someone had," Poynter's mother took a breath, "had defecated. Defecated, Poynter! Someone had gone number two on the stairs."

Big Hunt had shifted gears. He was talking to Uncle Lee now, and Poynter watched his Uncle Lee laugh and run his hands over his head. Big Hunt grabbed at the front of his chest and lifted himself up and down, moaning like a woman. He had a lot of hair for a man his age. Poynter looked down over the rail. His mother was losing her hair. He looked at his mother. His mother sat with her sister. Who'd walked in fussing

about a casserole. Had said hello by way of fussing about the casserole some more. He looked at his mother's sister's stale bread husband, another uncle. He was twitching in his loafers.

Poynter watched the girl down on the lawn. Her hair was pulled back in another thick tail. Where do they get all these hair ties? Up, down. She was beautiful. Why wasn't she with her own family? Did she have family? Poynter failed to recollect. Where was his NASA helmet? He had been to Space Camp when he was eleven. She had a tattoo of a lemur on her lower back, eyes wide and unblinking.

A kid was pulling on Poynter's shorts. "Uncle Boy, Uncle Boy. Your girlfriend's looking for you."

"No she's not." She was turning a skipping rope. He'd turned twenty-eight in Jalalabad. Maria had written him a song. "Want to hear it?" she said. It was just happy birthday, with different words. This is how it went: "Jalala-bah-dee to you. Jalala-bah-dee to you. Jalala-bo-dy, Jalala-bo-dy. Jalalabody to you." Some nights, when he was alone over there—when he had computer access—Poynter lurked on the Walgreens' website. He read product reviews, ravenous. Read them with a mixture of jealousy and disgust. "these condoms are ousome my girlfriend said the taste was g8 and now thanks to that i get alot more pleasure." He'd write them down, read them, later, to Maria. "I would recomend this to my son my daughter and anyone that asks me what i like. they are extremely thin and well lubricated. i have to say these are the best condoms iI've evr tried and the vibration rings, she likes!" His nephew was still pulling on his shorts. He wanted to stick a bag over his head—his nephew's head. Spin it around, smother the

boy. Before it was too late. Poynter wondered if he still had that old NASA space helmet.

Poynter picked the boy up. Held him over the ledge. The boy screamed, delighted. Poynter pulled him back in. "Where's your mother at?" Poynter said. "How's that knee of yours?" The BandAid was massive. "We got any firecrackers for tonight? Your dad take care of that? Uh huh?" The kid was nodding, nodding, nodding. "You ready to blow some shit up?" Poynter said.

"Yessir."

Kid's face was solemn, tanned, bright as a brand-new penny.

Big Hunt mooed behind him.

Where's my illudium Q-36 explosive space modulator?

Where's that NASA helmet?

"Where's that girl?" Poynter said. I've got to get out of here. We'll take out the boat.

On the S.S. Peach Pie, Jules says she's getting hungry.

"Have a beer," Poynter said, lifting his own. "Kills the appetite."

"Something's eating you up," the girl says, adjusting her straps.

"Me?" Poynter says. "Nothing in particular."

When their tour had been extended, Poynter's mother had sent him a package. "I'm praying for all of y'all, every day. Here's a few things to remind you of home. Stay safe and sound, now." She'd sent a children's book she'd found at Barnes and Noble. An early reader, level 1. About a dog called Biscuit. Why she thought *that* would help,

Poynter couldn't say. And one of his old books, *The Wonderful Flight to the Mushroom Planet.* His mother couldn't have known—could she? That he'd always imagined that Chuck and David were Hunter and Hutton. And that he'd been the one left behind, with this book.

Poynter's mother couldn't have known that there'd just been one casualty. Not the first, for Poynter. But the worst.

Poynter was walking their MWD. They were just strolling around on the edge of the market. Poynter'd been craving a walk, had really been craving a Coke. Had leashed up the dog. Wasn't even on duty. That goddamn dog, though, he couldn't stop working.

Sniffed too hard. Got his face blown off.

Poynter had been taking him—Donut—for a walk.

An IED. An old tire. KABOOM.

They can be anywhere. They could be everywhere.

A Marine takes the challenge of being extended in stride. Semper Gumby.

Poynter'd had a few scrapes and bruises. "Come home with any good scars?" Uncle Hunt asked.

"Nothing in particular," Poynter says again. "Let's do a donut." Poynter spins the wheel to the left, punches his right arm into the air. Loses his balance. Falls to his knees.

Jules stands up and says, "You hang out, Poynt. I'll drive her in."

Poynter kneels on the floor of the boat. Slides his hands along the floor of the boat, until his face rests in a puddle.

The girl slows the boat down. The boat shudders. After about half length of the lake, Poynter touches her foot with his. She doesn't flinch. He leaves his foot there. He thinks, maybe I'll add a mushroom to the Pluto. He's been thinking about this. He'll be lucky if it's his only one. His only memorial tatt. If this is the worst one.

Poynter ships back out in a week.

Maybe, Poynter thinks, they can go today.

And do that.

And a donut, around his ankle. The girl slows down a bit more. When Poynter feels sure she's about to pull her foot away, he stands up. He picks up his helmet. He takes another beer from the cooler. She looks at him, and he walks up to her, and he runs the cold can down her back. She smiles. He leans back, looks at her backside. It's mapped with the red creases of sitting for a long time. He pulls the braided cord from the waistband of his swimsuit. He drags it through the air, a white ribbon behind his head. He thinks of the mess on the treehouse floor. He could let it go, but he doesn't. He ties the string around her head. Around Jules.

"C'mon, Rambo," he says. "One more loop. Just the two of us."

Boyd Poynter spends the early evening hours napping on the deck. Pillowed on his helmet. Warm from his sunburn. He wakes up with that kid again, sitting on his back.

"They say I can't go swimming less you come, too."

The birds are starting to swarm in the trees. Poynter looks up to the house, squints. Blinks. His contacts have sealed to his eyes. The adults seem clean, shiny. He

blinks again. They're wearing silken things. The women have large cocktail baubles on their hands. This is a party for him, Poynter knows.

"What time is it?" he says.

"Time to swim!"

Poynter looks for his mother; and there she is.

Poynter presses himself up. His sunburn is bad. He takes the kid's hand, walks him back toward the house. Where the dock ends and the grass begins, Poynter feels his dad's eyes land on them. He looks up. His dad nods. Poynter grabs the kid, swings him up, tucks him close. He turns around, sprints down the dock. And he jumps, he and the boy, one giant leap.

Underwater, Poynter opens his eyes. A fish swims up, looks at him, moves its mouth. "That's it?" Poynter hears the fish say. "*That* was the earth-shattering kaboom?"

Poynter scissors his arms up so he sinks even lower.

On the Apollo 11 insignia, an eagle flies down to the moon. He looks about to land in a crater. BOOM! America!

But in his claws, they put an olive branch.

On their way to their most recent position, Golf Company—9th Marines, 2nd Battalion, "Hell in a Helmet"—had travelled through the Helmand province. In Southern Afghanistan, where the apple core rests on the rest of the world. Boyd Poynter had been to a rehearsal dinner once, a few years back. At The Helmand, a white tablecloth restaurant in Baltimore. He'd worn seersucker pants and a striped bowtie. He'd eaten a

soft pumpkin appetizer with garlic yogurt sauce. "Do pumpkins grow," Boyd had whispered, "in Afghanistan?" The food was delicious.

"Hamid Karzai's brother," Boyd's date whispered, "owns this restaurant."

"What's that?" Boyd said, his mouth full of sauce.

"This restaurant," his date said. What was her name, again?

Boyd cleaned his plate. The pumpkin gave softly between his teeth, slid down his throat in a pumpkin experience—the only thing to call it—a "pumpkin experience" unlike any pumpkin pie his mother had ever made.

Five years later, Poynter, Lance Corporal, buried Donut, Military Working Dog. He ate every single one of Donut's snacks. Donut was buried in Poynter's best pillowcase, a case from Poynter's father's factory, a case handloomed in America. Poynter buried Donut after going for a walk. Poynter had been thirsty, he'd—crawled back through the gravel, he'd—picking out the biggest chunks—intestines spilling out like he'd had—a black tail twitching in Poynter's right—his one eye open, still—his tail in Poynter's hand while he—

"Who's Hamid Karzai?" Boyd had whispered to his date.

Poynter wondered, years later, travelling through the Helmand province in a country run by the brother of the owner of a Baltimore restaurant—Poynter wondered what he was even doing there. In his HumVee, in shirts-off-guns-out weather. Kegger weather. Rainbows and Polos weather. Just-a-couple-of-hymens weather. Poynter was wearing a shirt and a vest and a helmet and a gun on his shoulder. Wondering why, if the world's so small, he felt so far away from that dinner, from the pumpkin, from that girl. So far away from that Boyd. Poynter chewed a twist of dip, looked where he was

supposed to look. At the rows and rows of Afghan olive trees, planted for the first time by American troops, for the first time, in the Sixties. The trees overgrown and wild, now. The Sergeant was saying something something something about the prospects for growth. Something about autonomy. If this farming thing can just take off—in Marjah, where 45 Americans had recently been killed.

Neither foreign financier forfeited surfeit of either species of olive—

Boyd feels his feet touch the bottom, curl around a stick.

75 percent of Americans believe humans will land on Mars by 2033.

For 48 minutes of each orbit, Michael Collins was out of radio contact with the Earth. For a whole day, Michael Collins sat alone in space.

The girl—Jules—had piloted the boat back in. She'd docked it, beautifully.

A mission to Mars would take 520 days. Getting there, doing their thing, coming home. Taking his helmet off. Breathing the Earth air.

Opening the hatch on the reentry pod.

His head above the water, now, Poynter spots the kid. The kid is floating, moving his arms like a water beetle. "Wow, Uncle Boyd," the kid says. "You sure can hold your breath for a really long time."

On the dock, Boyd's brother is waving him in.

"Yo, Boyd, Uncle Hunt wants to know: Do they make camel burgers?"

Hunter sticks out a hand. Boyd takes it. "Gee," Boyd says. "I don't remember. Tell Uncle Hunt he can come to the Head," Boyd says. "Find out for himself."

Another nephew comes running up. Running up with his father. Another one of Boyd's brothers. "Uncle Boy, Uncle Boy." He is waving two sparklers, one unlit.

"Oh goody!" Boyd says, in his best Marvin the Martian. He takes the unlit sparkler. "My illudium Q-36 explosive space modulator!"

The boy tilts his head, like *what?* Runs off.

"They don't watch cartoons?" Boyd Poynter says.

"*I* got it," Hutton says, leaning down, then reaching out. "You dropped this, Bro." Hutton puts Boyd's helmet on his head. Hunter wraps a towel around Boyd's shoulders.

"Dad sent this down," Hunter says about the towel. "Wants to know what you think. Something about loops. 'Is that enough loops?' he said."

Boyd, king for a moment, says, "That's enough."

And then there's Jules, with her stick. Black hair in a tail. And two giant marshmallows, one tiny match.

Happy Kids Are All Alike

Elliot's working his way through a bag of Pop Secret. He's eaten the popcorn, is at the point where he reaches into the bag, uses his nails to scrape up the fake, salty butter. When the phone rings, he looks at his mom. She doesn't move. She's on the sofa, watching a game show called *Supermarket Sweep*. She has a plastic tray of cookies and is breaking another one in half. Elliot has seen this trick before: half-cookies don't count. He puts the ripped-open bag on the table, wipes his hands on his pants. He picks up the ringing phone and says, "Martin residence. Elliot speaking."

"Kiddo. You're not a Martin. You're a Lassiter. Is your mom there?" It's Elliot's dad. On the TV, one of the contestants picks up two slippery turkeys, one in each arm. He starts to run, drops one. Picks it up, drops the other. He leaves one on the ground, sprints away. It's actually a pretty awesome show.

"Yeah," Elliot says. "She is. Do you need her?"

"No. No, no. Listen." His dad starts talking fast, like he's in a big hurry. Which he always seems to be. "I'm gonna pick you up from school tomorrow, just like usual." Elliot's in seventh grade, spends every other weekend with his dad. It's Thursday, the last week of September. Elliot's dad says, "I'll pick you up, but then here's the plan. How'd you feel about pizza every night, all weekend? Unlimited Xbox? And—I don't know—you can invite a friend or two over, if you want? How's all that sound? Sound good?"

Elliot switches the phone to his other ear, holds it with his shoulder. He tears the bag open for more butter, spills unpopped kernels onto the table and onto the floor. His

dad's always jumpy. *Sound good? Sound good?* On his good days. As Elliot picks up the kernels, his dad speeds ahead. "Here's the thing. The thing is, I won't be here. I have to go out of town. Business. But! *Mi casa es su casa*, okay? So you're going to have a grown-up weekend on your own. And get your homework done and all that, and I'll see you on Sunday night. Okay? Take you to school Monday morning. If you can handle all that without telling your mom? There's an extra twenty bucks in it. Got that, pal? How's that sound, chief?

Elliot leans his chair back on two legs and looks around the room. His mother's in the same place, face looking the same way. His half-sister is on the floor, slapping her xylophone. Elliot looks at a picture on top of the TV, a picture of his gone-forever older brother. His brother's dented acne-face is being kissed by the girl in the picture. Elliot hasn't seen his brother or the girl for almost a year. He no longer has a brother, and Elliot thinks that's okay.

There's a piece of a corn kernel stuck between one of Elliot's teeth and his gums. Elliot fishes around, gets it out, and says, "That sounds great, Dad."

"Okay! Alright!" Elliot can practically see his dad slapping a thigh. "Hey, maybe while you're here, I'll show you how a lawnmower works. These are important things to know. You ever mowed a lawn?"

Elliot's not sure why he lies about it, except that he's annoyed. He's annoyed that there *is* no lawn, at Mom's place. And Dad knows that. He's annoyed that the catch—alone for a whole weekend, which had sounded pretty great—hadn't really been the *real* catch. With his father, there's always another catch. "Sure," he says. "Of course. Of course I've mowed a lawn."

"Alright, then. Until tomorrow. I'll be in the Impala. At our usual spot."

"Wait," Elliot says. "What's an Impala?"

"A car. An animal. But in our case, a car. What color would you call it, Cheryl?" Elliot hears a woman's voice murmur something in the background. "Bronze. That's right. Alright, then. A bronze Impala. Okay? See you then."

Elliot hangs up the phone and his mom says, "Boy, *he* sure is talkative. Don't let him make you mow his lawn, Elliot." She breaks another cookie in half, starts nibbling her way through it. The cookie never moves from her lips, just slowly disappears.

Someone on the TV sweeps a whole rack of spices into a cart with his arm. Another guy is piling up steaks, laundry detergent, some vitamins. Elliot's mom makes tiny little lunging motions, as the players grab and slip and heave. The point is not to find the best bargains. It's the opposite, Elliot sees, of when he goes shopping with his mom. The point is to rack up the largest bill possible. It's stupid, but mesmerizing. When they roll up to the register, his mom takes a deep breath and breaks another cookie. "I hope the sisters' team wins," she announces. Elliot can see the ones she's talking about, and he hopes they win, too. They're hot.

Elliot says, "Mom, you told me next time I saw you with a bag of cookies—"

His mom turns around, holding up her snack. "Hey. Can't I eat half a cookie in peace around here?" On the floor, the baby holds up her hand. Elliot's mom gives the baby the remainder of the cookie. The baby shoves it toward her mouth and starts gumming it. Elliot's mother wipes her hands on her jeans. She holds up her hands and wiggles her fingers. "See? No cookie." She pushes the plastic tray back into the package, rolls the top down, folds the tabs in, and throws the bag at him. "Put those

where I can't find them." Plucking at the top of her shirt, she bounces the crumbs down over her chest, letting them fall to her stomach. She lifts up the hem to keep in the crumbs, walks over to the trashcan that sits beside the front door. She flaps the fabric.

Over her shoulder, the winning team is announced. As the sisters jump up and down his mother smoothes her hands down the front of her chest. She says, "Mark is coming over to watch football. I want you to take a showerm, now, and, after dinner, clear the table. No complaining, okay? Okay."

In the bathroom, Elliot has to unpin the diapers from the retractable laundry cord that connects one corner of the shower to the other. He stacks the diapers on the back of the toilet and removes various boats and ducks and frogs from the floor of the tub. When he showers, he rinses the shampoo out once and then adds more back in. The unrinsed shampoo is something that Elliot's trying out: he can smell clean, he can *be* clean; but his hair will have that messy, dirty look that seems to be popular at school. Keeping his head out of the water, now, he soaps the rest of his body. Neither of his parents will pay for contacts and, in the shower, this is fine. Elliot knows what he doesn't need to see. He's unimpressed by his chest, by his legs, by the thinness of his neck. His penis curves slightly to the left. Everything but the hair on his head—the only hair he has—disappoints him.

When Mark arrives, Elliot goes outside to check the mail. He does this every time Mark comes over, because every time Mark comes over, Elliot's mom makes an embarrassing scene. She flutters around his fat body, pulling him onto her fat body, making him look at her in the face. Then she rubs her hands up and down his back and he leans his crotch into hers, saying, "Long fucking day." They go into her room and

shut the door and everything is quiet for a while, except the TV. Then, always, Mark yells. Sometimes there's a thumping noise, and then Elliot's mom comes out. Sometimes her knees are all bumpy and red—from the carpet, Elliot knows—and she goes into the bathroom because she "has to brush her teeth before dinner."

Last summer, when the A/C was broken and everyone's window was open, Elliot heard his mom crying in the middle of the night. He listened for a while, wondering if she was crying because Evan was gone. Eventually, he heard her say, "I don't want to have any more goddamn kids." Elliot was personally offended by this comment. Then he was surprised by Mark's pretty nice response. Mark said, "What? It's okay, Carol. Okay? We'll stop. We have Emily. You don't have to, Carol. You don't have to, anymore." These promises were broken up with kissing noises. Soon enough, his mom stopped crying. Everything got quiet again, except for the sounds of a faraway TV. When Elliot was almost asleep, he heard Mark's voice again. "It's okay, Carol," Mark said. "It's really no problem. You'll just have to blow me and I'll fuck you in the ass." Mark laughed and his mom started crying again. Elliot was angry and, as much as he tried not to think about it later, he'd developed the biggest hard-on of his life.

So when Mark comes over, Elliot goes to get the mail. Elliot's mother lets him keep the mailbox key on his own personal keychain. Because she tries to go up and down the stairs as little as possible. She hadn't been thinking, she always says, about how much *walking* is involved. When you live on the third floor, she points out. With no elevator.

Elliot opens the mailbox, takes out the usual bills and credit card offers. He pulls out his magazines. He keeps some reading material here in the box, just in case he has

time to kill. His Victoria's Secret catalog and his free trial copy of *Men's Health*. When Mark comes over, it's high-traffic mailbox time; mostly Elliot just puts the catalog inside the magazine. If he had a computer—but he doesn't. By now, Elliot knows the names of all the bras and all the underwear styles. In his favorite picture, one of the girls is facing a window and looking back over her shoulder at him. She's wearing nothing on top, and a little pair of pink cotton underpants. They're printed with blue flowers. Her shoulder blades make a little cave on her back. If he covers up her face, she becomes anyone he wants.

His mom doesn't even need the catalog, anyway. Her boobs are too big for the Victoria's Secret sizes. The little baby has boobs, too. Mark is fat, now Elliot's mom is fat, and the baby will be a fatso, too. It's in the genes.

Back upstairs, the family sits down at a table that's been pushed against the wall. Elliot, his mom, and Mark each occupy a side; the baby floats in her chair at the corner, between Elliot and his mom. If he reaches his arms out, Elliot can touch both the couch and the coffeemaker. They have salad from the bag and a rotisserie chicken that Mark brought. Conversation is limited. When Elliot complains about the math teacher at school, Mark looks at him for pretty much the first time.

"Jesus Christ, your hair is dirty." Mark says this without emotion, the same way he might say, "Oh look. There's that dog taking a crap on the grass again."

Elliot's mom spoons food toward the baby's mouth. "He just took a shower," she says, not looking at anyone.

"Like hell he did." Mark looks at Elliot more closely, then shakes his head. "No way."

"Way," Elliot says. He puts down his fork. "Smell me," he says.

Mark says nothing. He simply raises his eyebrows to Elliot's mother, and Elliot's mother sighs. "That's enough, Elliot," she says.

Mark pours more ranch dressing on his plate, takes it over to the couch. He flips on the pregame show. Mark puts so much ranch on his salad, he uses it for dipping his chicken in, too.

While she smoothes mashed bananas across the baby's face, Elliot's mom asks Elliot if he plans to watch the game with them. Elliot says no, that he has homework. The baby laughs. Mark's watching the cheerleaders closely but still manages to say, "You're an idiot. Don't watch if you don't want, but what the hell do you think they'll be talking about in school tomorrow?" So after he clears the table, Elliot sits back down in his chair. Mark watches the game with his arm around Elliot's mom, drinking beers that she bought. Elliot can already taste the pepperoni. Is already moving Lara Croft across the island, with his thumbs. Just one day of school, then the weekend. Unlimited Xbox. His mom puts the baby to bed and when Elliot leaves during halftime, no one comes looking. He falls asleep and dreams, as usual, of nothing.

Elliot's dad hates waiting in the carpool line, so Elliot always walks up to the grocery store to meet him, four blocks away. The Impala is waiting by the bus stop, engine running. Elliot's dad honks to say hello. He flips the flashers on, gets out of the car, and walks around to the passenger side. Elliot watches a woman carefully unbuckle her seat belt. She climbs out of the car and stands on the curb, holding a little purse in front of her with both hands. Her long black hair is pulled off her face and gathered at

the top of her neck in a scrunchie. She looks young, for a grown-up. She scratches her leg with her foot. His father introduces them.

"Elliot, this is Cheryl," he says. "Cheryl, this is my son. Cheryl's from Vietnam," he adds, lifting his arm to point, for some reason, at the 7-Eleven across the street.

"Yes, today I'm very glad to tell you hi," Cheryl says. She talks very carefully. But it sort of seems like she gives up on each word as it comes out of her mouth.

Elliot just nods, feeling stupid, he thinks, that he doesn't know *what* he feels.

"Elliot likes to play soccer," his dad says. He talks slower when he's talking to her, like he has to stretch his mouth more to make each word sound right. It sort of makes him seem like he's on drugs. What Elliot thinks that would seem like. It seems, for now, like a good thing.

"Ah," she says. "Soccer," she says. "That is nice, that game." Her th sounds like a d. Her words fall away, as soon as she lands on them. This is weird, Elliot thinks.

She smiles at him, then, and Elliot is unexpectedly shy. He looks at his feet and says, "Well, you see, I don't really play. I mean, I love soccer, I *play*, but not really. I actually sit on the bench a lot. You see, at my school there are all these Mexicans…" Elliot trails off. The excuses he and his friends make to each other seem strange, now. He can't complain about immigrants to an immigrant. Instead, he just shrugs and so does she, smiling. When he smiles back, her smile widens to reveal an awkward set of teeth in a suddenly beautiful face. He grins. Then, quickly, her expression changes. She puts her hand in front of her mouth and looks at the ground. Elliot looks at the sky, checks for a cloud.

From behind her hand she mumbles, "Your father say he get me brace." Looking at Elliot's dad, she adds something else.

Elliot looks at his dad, too. He thinks she said teeth. His dad just shrugs his hands in the air as if to say, "I'm right, right?" Elliot wants to tell her that her teeth look fine. Instead, they all get in the car.

His dad explains everything, of course, as he drives the car home. Cheryl is one of the girls at the nail salon near his carwash. She's been here for three years, has been living with her cousin and her cousin's husband. She doesn't have her driver's license or, for that matter, a visa. Her name's not Cheryl, he adds.

Cheryl turns around and points at herself. "Chau," she says.

"But she likes the name Cheryl."

"Sounds like Carol," Elliot says, doubtfully. Carol is his mother's name.

"Rhymes with Daryl!" his father says, doing a rat-a-tat-tat on the steering wheel and grinning into the rearview mirror.

"Anyway," his dad says. "She's very good at her job. I always thought she was cute, so one day I got my feet done so I could meet her. 'Nails wewy bad,' she says to me. Hah!" He looks at Cheryl, and laughs again. "Wewy, wewy bad. I say, 'Yes, they are. And *you* are a beautiful lady.' She says, 'Sit.' So I sat. And that half hour of her scraping my feet was one of the blissful, most painful half-hours of my life, sonny boy." Elliot's dad takes his hand off the wheel and squeezes Cheryl's knee. Elliot thinks he doesn't do a very good Cheryl impression. "And that's what love is, right?" his dad carries on. "So wonderful it hurts. Anyway, I give her my card and say, 'I would like to see you again.' 'You make appointment,' she says."

"You make appointment," she echoes, soft, fingering the edge of her skirt. They look at each other. She smiles faintly and he laughs.

"You make appointment," he says again. Quieter. Shaking his head, chuckling to himself.

He continues. "Anyway, two weeks ago, a man comes in to see her. The executor of somebody's will. Cheryl does nails for a bunch of old folks over in that place, Keswick Multi-Care. Well, apparently one of them died."

"Mrs. Stevens," Cheryl says. "No kid. Bad nail. Old people have worst nail," Cheryl says, turning around to confide in Elliot.

Elliot nods. He'd never thought about it, but that makes perfect sense.

"So this old lady, in her will, she left Cheryl a car! Two years old, won it in a raffle, never been driven."

"She say to me, 'Work hard, good thing will happen.'"

"Good things! Damn right! And Cheryl had my card: Daryl Lassiter, Automotive Detailing. We worked out a little deal. I'd give it a tune-up and she'd let me take her to dinner. So she brought it to me, thinking she might sell it. I told her to keep it! And now, here we are." His dad slaps the steering wheel and laughs, while Cheryl stares placidly out at the unrolling road.

"Here we are," she repeats, trying out the words, dragging the last one into two syllables.

Elliot's dad glances in the rearview mirror. "Isn't she great? Lesson of the day, sonny boy: keep giving out your card. It'll probably be the damnedest strange thing, but your luck *can* change."

His dad smiles at him again; not yet forty, he's is a good-looking man. Elliot, in spite of the day he had's and a funny sense he's got—a feeling that his dad is making fun of everyone—smiles back. They ride along in silence, his dad drumming out a tune on the wheel. Elliot drifts away, is caught, again, in the sudden downpour that drenched his soccer practice. As the cross-country team jogged by, Elliot's head begun to bubble, the dried layer of shampoo frothing up. He'd tried to pat the suds down, hoping to contain them. As usual, his instinct had been wrong. His coach was the first one to notice. "Need a towel, Lassiter?" he shouted across the field. When everyone looked, of course, Elliot should have whipped his head into a full lather. He should have joined in on the joke. Instead, he pretended confusion. As he shrugged and cringed and said "what the heck" and tried to wring out his hair on his already soaked t-shirt, somebody kicked a ball at him, called out, "Yo, Suds!" The cross-country team jogged by the bench and the kids on the sideline pointed. By Monday, everyone will know. The nickname will spread and his reputation will slide. In this car full of optimism, Elliot wonders: how does his dad do it? Wind up with this brand-new car, and a nice girl, too?

Elliot is looking forward to a weekend when he won't even be seen.

At the house, Elliot's dad gives him a key and takes sixty dollars out of his wallet. "Pizza coupons are on the fridge, lawnmower's under the porch, and if I need to get in touch with you, I'll call the house. Don't answer the phone! If you hear my voice on the answering machine, that means I'll call right back and *then* you pick up. Here's my cell number. Try not to call your mom. Okay?" He looks out the screen door to the car, where Cheryl is sitting with a straight back, her head turned away from the house. Her

black hair is loose now, hanging down her back, contained in the well of her shoulder blades. His dad catches him looking. He asks, "So…you like her?"

"Sure," he says. "She's quiet," he adds.

"Not all the time," his dad says with a wink. "Okay? Have fun now. Sheets on my bed are clean, but you can only sleep there if you bring a girl over. Hah. Okay?" He winks again, and punches Elliot on the shoulder. Does his stupid boxer's shuffle. He rubs his knuckles into Elliot's hair. Elliot squirms out from under his hand. His dad runs out the door, toots the horn, and is gone.

Elliot wanders around, loving the solitude. He's never been here by himself for more than an hour. He thinks, if I were my dad, I might've left us, too. With nothing better to do, he opens all the drawers in his father's dresser. He finds the expected tangle of socks and t-shirts and crumpled-up pants. In the bedside table he finds nail clippers, condoms, and a bottle of "natural feeling Liquid personal lubricant"—which Elliot opens and squirts in his hand. He rubs his palms together, curious, and then wipes them off on the sheets. In the kitchen, he opens all the drawers and all the cupboards, too. In theory, he's looking for porn; but soon, all he wants is a snack. He eats a large bag of Cheetos, forces himself to drink a beer, and watches two movies in a row on TBS. He doesn't have to do dishes; he doesn't have to do homework. When he gets tired, he goes into Evan's old room, pushes a lot of crap off the bed, and falls asleep.

Saturday slips by quickly enough. He eats sugary cereal, plays the Xbox. In the early afternoon, when the blaze of his video game gunfire is interrupted by the sound of an even larger roar, Elliot goes to the window. For two hours he watches a crew of men

tear up the parking lot of an old Popeye's restaurant. He used to eat there, with Dad and Evan, on nights when his mom would work late. Later, between the lazy flick of the channels, he talks to Derek. He hadn't been able to find his father's magazines. "They have to be *somewhere*," Derek says. He lists all of his own dad's favorite spots. Elliot asks if he wants to come over tomorrow and look for himself. "No, man," Derek says. "Tomorrow we're going to my niece's birthday party. She's my niece, but she's older than me. It's weird."

"Very," Elliot agrees. But he doesn't really mind that Derek can't come. He spends the night reading romance novels he brought from his mom's house. He flips through three of them as the sky turns black, taking his time on the good parts.

In exchange for this weekend of peace and aloneness—to get *all of this*, his father had said on the phone—Elliot is supposed to mow the lawn. On Sunday afternoon, when the weather is hottest—after putting it off for as long as he could—Elliot pulls out the machine. And tries.

The machine is old and rusting. One of the wheels is crooked. He does what he thinks is called "priming the engine." He's supposed to press the bulb near the gas tank until it feels "full." Does that mean press and hold down, or press down and release, press down and release? Elliot tries both. But each time he punches the button it feels exactly the same. Each time he presses down, the button takes forever to pop back up.

He shifts a lever near the handle to the "turtle" setting. He pulls the safety bar back, yanks on the cord. At this point, the engine should sputter. It will sputter, then he will move the lever halfway to "rabbit"; he'll let it run for a minute, switch to full

"rabbit." And then mow. These are the instructions, clear enough, that Elliot had gotten on Friday from Derek. But the engine never sputters, never coughs. Elliot pulls the cord until sweat drops down on the lenses of his glasses. It's not supposed to be this hot, in September. His hair is damp, and that reminds him of soccer. Anyway, he thinks, kicking the crooked wheel. I did try. Back under the porch goes the lawnmower. Elliot goes inside, cursing his misfortunes. No doubt the tall grass will somehow be all his fault.

He peels off his sweaty shirt, splashes water on his face and neck. In a few hours, his father will return home, expecting to smell fresh-cut grass. Elliot opens the fridge and stands in front of it for a long time. His nipples grow ridiculously hard. Eventually, when he has goosebumps that are truly, insanely huge, he chooses a soda, carries it into the living room. Elliot throws himself on the rug, scratches his new bug bites in an act that is both punishment and a kind of relief.

It's at least a few minutes of lying flopped on the floor, here, before Elliot squints, blinks his eyes, and sees the boxes.

There are two dusty shoeboxes wedged in behind the Blu-ray, half-hidden by the tangle of wires. They say 'Air Jordan' and Elliot pulls them out, wondering if they really have sneakers in them; if his dad, maybe, has some cool vintage pairs. He pulls out the boxes and flips the first one open. Photographs of him, his mom, Evan, and his dad. "Love, Carol, Daryl, Evan and Elliot." This is what it says at the bottom of the picture that sitting on top. It's a Christmas card. Elliot dips his hand into the box and runs his fingers along the edge of the stack. He hops up and carries the boxes to his dad's chair. He sits down and carefully sets aside the first box. He'll save that for later—or maybe

they're both as good. He leans back and sets the second box on his lap. With his finger he traces Michael Jordan's silhouette, jumping so easily, so gracefully, across the black box. Jordan soars across the cardboard and Elliot opens the box. Every single picture—Elliot sifts through them quickly, then slower—every single picture is of a penis.

They must be what he thinks you'd call a "Polaroid." They're smallish, square pictures of penises, from various angles and with various backgrounds. How old they are, and when they were taken, Elliot doesn't know. They must be old though—maybe as old as Elliot. He's never even *seen* a picture like this. Like this in any way. Not this size. Not pictures of—he runs through a list of words, settles on *cocks*. He flips through the photos, turning them this way and that. He slowly realizes, from the repetition of a freckle, that they are all the same one. He quickly counts. Over a hundred in the box. The hand that's holding it—that hand is his dad's. There's the two divots on the skin between his finger and thumb. When he was a kid, his dad told him it was a snakebite; later Elliot learned that they were only chicken pox scars; even later, when he had chicken pox himself, he learned that no one gets chicken pox on their hands. His doctor said so. Elliot doesn't know where the scar came from, but he knows where it belongs.

As he sorts through the photos, Elliot scratches his bites.

He's seen the penis limp, like this one, a photo that reminds Elliot of the time when he went to the beach two summers ago, with Evan and his girlfriend and his dad. Evan's girlfriend and Evan and Elliot's mom had been pregnant at the same time; their mom stayed at home, though. She'd moved out just six months before. Everyone changed into their swimsuits in the backseat of the car in the parking lot—even the girl. That's when he saw it like this one.

But he's never seen it like the penis in some of the others. Erect. His dad's hand is in there, lots of times, holding it at the base or by the head. But not always. Sometimes the hand belongs to someone else; it's smaller, more delicate; or a different color; or callused and old. In one picture, the penis sits on a soft-looking palm. The pads of fingertips and the backside of long, pointed fingernails sprout up through his dad's squiggly pubic hair. Elliot flips through the photos, looking for pictures of the women who belong to the hands. He doesn't find any. The most he gets is the tip of a tongue. He doesn't see his mom, he's pretty sure. But Elliot does recognize the chair that he's sitting in, and the rug on the floor.

Elliot doesn't know what to do. He flips through them, numb, counting again. Some of the hands are repeats. But how many different ones are there?

When the phone rings, Elliot jumps, denting the one he was holding. He quickly starts packing the pictures away, suddenly aware he's not wearing a shirt. His dad will be home, any minute now. Elliot doesn't want to get caught. He puts the lids on, smears the traced dust with the heel of his hand. He jumps up and lies down on his stomach to replace the box he'd been looking through. The other box, though, he keeps. He hides it in his duffle bag, guessing that his dad won't even miss it. Elliot sits on his bed and takes a few deep breaths.

His tracks covered, now, Elliot starts to think. He's impressed that his father has been with so many women. He knows it'll be a long time—before anyone touches him like that. On his dick or on anywhere else. When he starts to imagine who that girl is, in the future? He sees hands, hands, hands; the only face he can picture is Cheryl's.

His cheeks are hot, and he can feel himself stiffening.

He can still mow the lawn.

Elliot jumps up and runs out of the room. He tries to call Derek for better instructions, for a solution to this impossible mower. But his friend's phone goes straight to voicemail. He decides to call Zach. Searching for the phonebook, he curses his mother—who's refused, again and again, to buy him a phone. His arousal changes to frustration. Who uses phonebooks anymore, anyway? If I had a cell phone, Elliot thinks, I wouldn't have to go through all these Petersens. His hand is running down a column, looking for any address that seems familiar. But his mom doesn't see why anyone his age needs a phone. "You'll only get in trouble," she says. Of course, Mark agrees. Mark always tells him vague stories he's heard on the news, about kids who get expelled for sexting. Elliot argued, once, that they could get him one that's just for talking. Mark had said, "They all have cameras these days. Even your mom's piece-of-crap phone can take a pretty decent picture. Hey, Carol?" His mother, in fact, has probably been calling the house phone all weekend. The phone's been ringing, and whoever calls won't leave a message. When he gets back to his mom's, he'll tell her he's not allowed to pick up at Dad's; what if there's an Emergency? Another reason Elliot *definitely* needs a cell. He'll wear her down, eventually. Or if he can figure out how to use this lawnmower. He'll start a lawnmowing company, and buy his own damn phone.

Finally he picks the right Petersen. Zach asks about the magazines, too, asks if Elliot was able to watch anything on his dad's computer. Elliot says no and no. He doesn't tell Zach about the Polaroids. When Zach starts talking about skateboards, Elliot knows he'll never stop. He tries to ask about the lawnmower. "Look out your window, numbskull," Zach says. Outside, the clouds are massing. "Just tell your dad you were

going to." Elliot can see a distinct line where there is no storm and then, suddenly, a place where there is. He feels inadequate, as he always does, talking to Zach. Zach has three older brothers and an older sister, all still living at home. He learns so much every day. Elliot has to teach himself everything, alone. "You ready for the math test tomorrow?" Elliot asks, looking over at the backpack he hasn't opened all weekend. "Fuck do I care about that," Zach says. Elliot says he'll see him tomorrow. Zach says, "Sure. If you're brave enough to show your face—Sudsy."

When his dad gets home, the lightning has come and gone but it's still pouring rain. His dad runs through the door with a couple bags of fried chicken and fries, Cheryl trailing behind. "Hey," his dad says. He comes over to the couch where Elliot is playing Xbox, hits the power button and says, "Come eat with your old man."

Elliot makes a big deal about sighing. He's embarrassed, at first, to see his dad. But what's worse is, he can't bring himself to even *look* at Cheryl, let alone say hi. The chicken is good, though, and he doesn't have to talk. They eat and his dad carries on a one-person conversation about all the things they did. Cheryl loves barbeque, he says. So he took her on a tour of all his favorite spots for good pit beef. Ribs, and pulled pork.

Elliot knows barbeque is his *dad's* favorite food. "I thought you were on a business trip," he says.

"Let me tell you something, son." His dad pushes his chair back, puts his hand on Elliot's shoulder. "Sometimes a man has business that doesn't involve work. Okay? Sometimes a man's business is nothing more—and nothing less—than a *woman.*" He swirls a French fry in ketchup, says, "You got that?"

Elliot nods. His dad takes a long gulp of beer. "Besides," he says. "I wanted to see my grandson." He reaches across the table and takes Cheryl's hand in his left. "Good looking kid." Elliot can't make a single sound. "And the rest of the scenery," his dad says, sucking on a chicken bone, moving his hand to push Cheryl's chin up, "was pretty fucking fantastic." He doesn't move his eyes from her face. When he starts licking his fingers, putting whole fingers in his mouth, Cheryl looks away. She pulls her hand out from under his. Elliot's dad pulls up his napkin, wipes his mouth and his hands. He pushes his chair back from the table.

"So," he says to Elliot. "What'd you do around here? I see you didn't mow the lawn."

"Well, I—"

"Had too much homework?" His dad laughs, but it's not the same laugh as it had been on Friday. Elliot feels his face get red. His dad slaps his hand on the table and says, "Dammit, Elliot, lighten up! Take a joke, okay? Jesus," he says. "Your brother would have laughed at that." When Elliot stays silent, looking at his plate, his dad scrutinizes him. He exhales, wrapping a drawn-out "fuck" into his sigh. "I don't give a shit about the lawn," he says. "Christ. That lawnmower's a bitch. I'll take care of it my own fucking self." He grabs some more fries and eats quietly for a while. "Won't anyone smile around here?" he asks. Elliot sees Cheryl try. A few moments later, his dad claps his hands. "Hey! You want to know how great your old man is? We bought you something. Cheryl, where'd you put that bag?" His dad goes over to her suitcase, which is held together, in places, with duct tape. Elliot's dad struggles with the zipper, really yanking on it. It gives a little, then gets caught again. Elliot's dad swears. He's

straining with effort and the suitcase trembles in his hands on the floor. When there's a little tearing sound and the zipper finally slips open, Elliot's dad has to hop back to keep from falling over. "Hah!" he says. Elliot tries not to look as Cheryl's shiny underwear and toiletries are tossed out. A can of hairspray rolls hollowly across the floor. His dad grabs a bra and throws it over the table, laughing. Cheryl's hand shoots out. She grabs it and stuffs it between her skirt and the chair. "Aha," his dad shouts. There's a pouch attached to the wall of the suitcase. He unzips the compartment and holds up a box. It has a picture of a phone on it. He tosses the box to Elliot and says, "I programmed my number as speed dial number one. Time to join the rest of the planet."

Elliot catches the box and turns it over in his hands. He looks at his father, who's surrounded by the mess he's made of Cheryl's things. "This is for me?" he says. It's not the newest phone, but still. He hadn't gotten a Christmas present, even, from Dad last year.

"Sure is," his dad says. He looks grim, serious. "We're on the family plan, now. Show him yours, Cheryl." Cheryl lifts up her purse, which Elliot realizes she's been wearing since she walked in the door. She places it on the table and carefully unzips it. She removes the phone and sets it down, with delicate fingers, next to her plate. She puts her hands in her lap, and lifts her eyes to Elliot's. He realizes, too, that Cheryl hasn't said a word since she walked in the door. There are bruises on her neck and he knows that can be a good thing. But Elliot doesn't feel good about these.

His father steps around and puts a tight grip on both of them. "The family plan," he says again, clamping their shoulders. He squeezes twice and lets go, running his hand down Cheryl's hair and giving Elliot's back an extra slap as he leaves the room.

* * *

Elliot looks at Cheryl. She gets up, starts putting her things away.

"How old are you?" he whispers.

She counts through some numbers on her fingers, says, "Nineteen."

"You don't have to stay," Elliot whispers. "You could go—"

"I'm wanting to stay," Cheryl says. "With this country."

While Cheryl is doing the dishes, his dad calls Elliot back to the table. He picks up Cheryl's phone, and flips it open. "We'll take a picture of you, so it shows up when you call her," he says. "Try not to look like a twerp." Elliot poses, smiles; and it actually does come out kind of good. "Hey, send me that," Elliot says. His dad does, and Elliot feels a happy buzz he's never felt, in his pocket. His dad puts his arm around Elliot, takes a sip of his beer. "I'll show you what comes up when *I* call her."

"Oh," Elliot says. "You don't have to. That's private."

"*Private* is right on money, son."

When Elliot is brushing his teeth, he finds himself trying to decide if he's happy. There's his phone, right there, and his hair looks good, and he's got a good smile. He remembers back to a time, right after Nana died, when his father had inherited the house and he and his mom and Dad and Evan had all lived here, together. He thinks about the box of photos in his duffle bag, and where he'll stash them when he gets back to his mom's. He thinks about adding Cheryl into the mix. He thinks he might be able to help her.

Elliot lifts up the toilet lid to pee. One Saturday when he was a kid, Elliot had waited until the end of cartoons to use the bathroom. He ran in, in a hurry, and pulled down his pants. It was this very toilet. He'd just started peeing when his brother came in behind. Evan grabbed Elliot's shoulders. Started shaking them. Back and forth, back and forth, and pee sprayed all over the side of the sink, and the toilet paper, and the floor. His brother laughed and said, "Stop pissing, Smelliot! Smelly smelly Smelliot!" But Elliot couldn't stop. He just ran out of pee at some point. Elliot ran to his mother. "What's going on," his dad said. His mother reported. "I'll take care of this," his dad said, turning off the TV with a click. "Kids are animals."

His dad walked Elliot back to the bathroom, where they'd stood and looked at the damage.

"Your mother's not cleaning this up."

"Evan made me—"

"Evan made you *nothing*."

"But he shook my—"

"Son? Whose piss is it?"

"But—"

"Whose piss is it? *Whose piss is it?*" His father started shouting.

Elliot's mother came to the door. She said, "Daryl, stop! I think Evan needs—"

"Carol," his dad said. "Would you shut up and let me do some parenting, here?" He turned back to Elliot, advanced one step forward, and then said, very quietly, "Son, I'm going to ask you one more time. Whose piss is it?"

"Mine. But—"

"No buts. It's your piss, you clean it up. Ask your mother what to use." His mother handed him the rubber gloves and the 409, and then his dad wouldn't let her help. His mother yelled, his father yelled. Then Elliot heard someone walk to the kitchen, open up the fridge. His mom cried in the bedroom, and Elliot cried in the bathroom. Evan watched TV while their dad watched Elliot, down on his hands and knees. He was drinking a beer. "You've got to learn how to clean up your messes," his dad kept saying. "Like a man," he said. "Like a little man."

Boy

Wash your sheets on Monday; wash your hands, patting yourself on the back to dry; don't worry—it's not like you told her you were getting a dog together; chill out; if that stain on the ceiling's still growing, take a picture and send it to your landlord; lay the groundwork; this is going to sound strange, coming from your mother—your father's not around, though, so I'm just going to say it—above all else and at all times, boy, please: think with the right head; keep tissues by the bed, or at least a roll of paper towels; roll over, press your face in your pillow; you can use paper towels as a neckroll, if for any reason your pillow's wet; roll over and stare at her breasts; this is how you squeeze the bread to make sure it's fresh; get some rest—it's good to have dreams; it's good to have condoms on hand, just in case; your hand has many parts: palm, fingers, nails; God made you in his image; the spitting image of your father; don't spit in public; don't wear your hat inside; *but I'm balding, Ma—my head gets cold*; a woman's hair is her crown; this is how you make her pubic hair stand on end: just whisper; this is how you pray: say, *Jesus*; say, *fuller than the moon, sweetheart*—and then say it again, yes, just like that; look out: just like that, she'll fall for you; this is how to make a girl laugh; this is how to make her miss you: go away; come on a postcard; this is how to let her know she's on your mind; this is how you drive a stick-shift; this is how you buy a used car; this is the ignition; this is where the clutch is; repeat after me: *deniability*; it is true that if you listen to the game on the radio, you free up your hands and eyes for other work; this is how to make her work for it; multitasking is critical to success; when you make a bet on the game, don't forget to collect your winnings; don't forget to come on them; don't forget that a boy is

not a brassiere—she has a special garment for support; get some fresh air; roll down your windows when the weather is nice; roll up your sleeves and stay busy; this is how you let a girl know that you have plans without telling her what they are; remember that a small mess is like a dirty pair of boxers—given enough time, it might just wash itself; to get distance from a woman, compare her to an article of clothing; always remember that there are always more socks, and that a good place to look for socks is on the floor; if a sock looks damaged, that hole might actually be your best way in; don't stay on the sidelines—get in the game!; different socks for different sports—short socks, tall socks, white socks, black socks; always remember that a sock is a sock is a sock is a sock; a car is a car is a car is a car; make sure it'll pass the emissions test; if your bread goes stale, you can grind it into breadcrumbs; don't let people twist your words; maintain deniability; don't be misinterpreted—unless you want to be; when you're hungry, there's always frozen ravioli; if you're out of sauce, well, we all have peaks and valleys; if you're out of ravioli, pick up your empty bowl and fill it; relax; always leave room for growth; don't adjust your genitals in public; if you must adjust your genitals, that's what a pocket's for; this is how you hide an erection with the waistband tuck; this is how you can jerk off in a public place; this is how to give her just enough information; this is how to smile to someone when you don't want her to get the wrong idea; this is how to smile to someone when you like the way her breasts look when she wears that orange dress; is it true you still don't know how bra sizes work?; a D is not a D is not a D is not a D; if you can remember nothing else: small number under, hefty letter in the sweater; this is how to unhook a bra, just by looking at her from across the room; this is how a smile works; this is how to wink in a text message; always remember to always remain

ambiguous; maintain deniability; when dating a certain girl, lay the groundwork with another; on the inside face of your front door write these instructions: Think With the Right Head; I've told you before—though you're bent on forgetting—"right" at any one time doesn't mean right at all times; would you dive into an empty pool?; would you wear sandals in the winter?; take no right turns on red (except where permissible, or if you think you won't get caught); this is how to signal; this is how to chill out: pack yourself a bowl; relax; pour her a bowl of Cheerios, bring it to her in bed; give her both kinds of banana; confuse—it's arousing!; walk her home and, if you like, pick buttercups; wildflowers are free; flowers pay you back in pussy; if you have a drinking problem, keep a case of Coronas in the fridge; it's good to test yourself; if you fail one test, that doesn't mean you'll fail the class; don't wear a crown of thorns; don't be ashamed to ask for help; shame is heavy if you carry it alone; spread the love!; remember that the biggest words aren't necessarily the long ones; remember what they taught you in kindergarten: sharing; always give; don't take too much; take what's rightfully yours; feel free to take what's been freely given; here's a paradox: if you give her your word, then you have to keep it; above all else, to thine own self be true; text her, staring into the fridge: *Wanna come over and do something stupid?*; don't spend time with enablers; girls who are always available have probably been available to others; stand on your own two feet; take care of your own shit; don't let anyone be your crutch; avoid substances, but be a man of substance; when facing temptation, try white knuckles; try anything once; don't put too much pressure on yourself; chill out; smoke a bowl; when she mentions "white knuckles," it's okay to tell her: *they turned green*; you don't owe anybody anything; allow room for interpretation; take space; strong emotions are valid and useful; be sure to

mention that you're not suicidal—it's just suicidal *ideation* and she shouldn't worry; don't let a woman's issues become your own; tell her you broke your phone; this is how to clean out the fridge: eat everything; this is how to stretch a paycheck: find a woman who'll cook for you; this is how to pick out a shirt; this is how to treat a sweat stain; this is how to iron out the creases: send it to the cleaner; this is how to make a girl think it's all her fault; if she says she wants to tear her hair out, tell her to shave her head instead—then she'll know what cold is; this is how to treat a burn; this is how to sear a piece of meat; *obviously* you still like her *as a person*; this is how you condescend while at the same time calling her—*certainly—a cool girl*; if her last email was *a bit overwhelming*, it's okay to tell her that; it's okay if you feel that she wasn't *100% honest in terms of expectations*; this is how to let her down hard; after all, you didn't say that you loved her—you just sang it in her ear; a song is a song is a song is a song; when she says let's make a bet, say, *sure*; if she lets you leave the terms open, then you're winning; if she lets you win the bet, then you've won; this is how to come on to a woman; remember: you'll always be The Most Important Man in the World to your mother; you can't help if she falls in love; if her ending's unhappy, remind her that she wrote it; we're each only in charge of one body; *but she says she's not the author of this story; says I wrote it with my dick*; don't be soft, boy—a woman's used to a little bit of bleeding; if the roof falls in, don't forget: you're the tenant, not the landlord; please tell me that you took a picture of that stain; sure, you fucked her—but she also fucked with you; she's just becoming the slut she's always been so bent on becoming; help her grow; trust me, I tried all her tricks once myself; don't blame yourself; this is a tie that your father left behind; this is how you tie a tie; this is a bowline; this is a half-hitch; don't tie the knot unless you know how

to loosen it; this is a monkey's paw; this is a figure-eight knot; this is how you tie a noose; let's see your hands—yes, just like his; this is how you wave goodbye; to treat a stubborn stain, throw it out; there are very few problems you can't magic away with a laugh; look on the bright side; be a shark: keep moving; the world is a shark tank—be a boat, float above it; this is how to truss a turkey; this is how to stuff a turkey; this is how to carve it; this is how you drive a car through the mountains; this is how to parallel park; this is when to floor it; please tell me, after all of this, you're not going to be the kind of man who just gives up his keys; never let a woman near the driver's seat—unless, after all, her head's in your lap; this is how to clear your browser history; this is how to clear your conscience; this is how to fill a womb; don't forget to empty the trash; your father asked me to teach you this word: deniability; this is how to pump your gas; don't put diesel in a gas-powered engine; there's fresh Wonder Bread at every gas station, all across America; what's done in public and what's done in private are two different things; it's fair to ask her to respect your privacy; this is how to squeeze her; this is how to make her legs shake; this is how to survive an earthquake; on a subconscious level, I promise: she likes it; *but she says I'm*—excuse me, but that slut—*an asshole, and I should find some other underwear*—was dressed that way, practically Saran-wrapped, was asking for—*she says she won't cover up my*—shit, son, you can't let her manipulate; be a man, boy; this girl is toast—I—just use your head, son; *but I don't*—don't tell me—after all these years—you're still not sure which head is right?

Just like your father. Go up to bed.

But, Ma, I—I'm hungry.

Go. You don't deserve a slice of bread.

Waxman

This is when your dad calls:

After the town is already a ghost town. After the pansies had boarded up, backed on out. After the course of the hurricane was—as they say on TV—"set." When it had made its final turn and they knew where it would hit—sometime on Halloween, they thought. Somewhere around Ocean City. Somewhere on top of your house, June, and mine. Were you watching The Weather Channel? From wherever you are? The way they're talking—throwing words around, like "catastrophic?" Are you worried, June?

Well, until your dad called, June, I wasn't.

We were ready. We'd finished our usual stockpiling, bought the four Bs: beer, batteries, bread, bottled water. We carried Sneed's motorcycle up the two flights of stairs. His sister's cat had run away. "So what?" Sneed said. "Just fuck it." Jason ditched our plan of being crazyass clowns; he taped out the name on his Carolina Hurricanes jersey, wrote "Mandy" in Sharpie on the tape. Said, "I'll just spin a lot." The best costumes, after all, are pretty minimal. K. Knowledge tweeted that he was back from New York—and that "of course" we knew what that meant. He'd be hosting Hallocane Hurriween at his place, for those of us "hardcore" enough. Me, I was softcore enough to try and go do my laundry. Everyone gave me shit for spending three hours at the Wash 'Er; I should have been "battening down the hatches" or some such bull. "There are no hatches," I said. Our windows were tight. When your dad called, I was already in that virtuous and grumpy mood—the way I always feel when I get back from the Laundromat, that dump of whirring fluorescence and humidity, the place you know I

hate most, of all places in the world. The place with the worst smell: wet, hot dirt and sin and salt and soap. I lugged my laundry home. I wondered, out loud, "Why can't we live in a place with some decent *facilities*? Facilities, same root as *facile*, *capiche?*" Then Sneed's sister's kid called me gay. For not speaking American. "It's Italian," I said. "You know, pasta, spaghetti? Pizza? You know, all your favorite foods?" I kid you not, this kid spits on my shoe.

Is that when your dad called?

Nope. After I folded my t-shirts. After I hung up my work shirts. Paired my socks. After my fight with the fucking drawer on that cheap-ass bureau some long-gone kid left behind. When my heart was all fired up with rage and I wanted to break something; when the first grey clouds were starting to roll in. After I tore the whole drawer out, couldn't get it back in and thought, well, hey, just fuck it. First casualty of the storm, right? I went outside with the drawer and a hammer and I was asking myself why I don't own anything that's worth a damn and I was answering myself that the deck is stacked, brah, and you need money to make money and it's all about fancy degrees and degrees of separation, connections, and you ain't got none. So I make my cheese some other way, sling plates and some bud and I pay good money for shitty shit that falls apart. When I threw that empty drawer across the empty parking lot; just as I was really getting into the skidding, splitting sound of it; soon as I'd gotten off that dangerous train of moneythink; soon as I'd started to loosen up, to look forward to meeting this piece of ass, Mandy; just then, like clockwork—though it's never happened before—*that's* when your dad calls. And calls me, first word, swear to God—though you were my *girlfriend*, June,

and never my wife—your dad calls me "son." Which my mother never did, you know. And you *know* I never heard it from no father.

Sweet Mother of the Fuck. I tap the hammer on the brim of my hat and I listen to him say, "Son, I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm in something of a jam and I didn't know who else to call. I'm stuck here at the hospital, on-call all weekend, and my wife's up at the clinic for Family Days, and, well, they say the hurricane's headed straight for my house. It seems," he says, in a minimally worried way, "that I'm fucked."

I wait, and I wonder how he got my number.

I mean, I know how he got my number.

He got it from you.

Which means he called you, or talked to you recently, or called your mom and your mom talked to you, even though you're not allowed to have a phone in there, so I've heard, so you must've had my number memorized. Do people still memorize numbers? If you had my number memorized, I think, then doesn't that mean—

"So I had your number," your dad continues, and then he stalls.

I think about the last time I saw him, how he was calmly turning the key in the ignition of his Benz and you were in the backseat of the car, wailing, and your mother was in the backseat, too, with earplugs in like she does sometimes and her hands around your arms, and then I remember seeing your dad's lips move, once, remember watching your struggle stop, like the sudden surrender of someone in a movie who's being suffocated and who then, all at once, gives up the ghost. Your dad's window rolled down. "I'm sorry about all this," he said, not looking at me. And it appeared that there had been some sort of discussion or capitulation on the part of your parents, because your

window rolled down, too, and your mother let your arms go, though she stayed in the middle seat in case she needed to grab you again and your arm came out of the car and you reached out and brushed a tear away, from somewhere near my eye, I guess, and I caught your hand while it was up near my face and kissed the inside of your wrist where I'd drawn you the ballpoint tattoo that was long gone then. Gone then, and even longer gone, now.

Your dad's on the phone, and I feel like I'm suddenly a caveman, holding a rock up to my ear. Except the rock is my phone and I want to throw it. I look across the street and see the mother from the unit below ours, pushing her tiny kid in a stroller like it's any old day and like there's not a hurricane spinning closer, slow as some drawn out foreplay before some dangerous sex. Sometimes we rag on Sneed, because he sleepwalks; say, maybe it was him that knocked up this lady. She's a real piece; squalls louder than the baby. Last time I saw *you*, June, that baby was no more than a basketball stuffed under her shirt.

Meanwhile, maybe your dad is waiting for me to say something, and I wonder if he feels as shitty as he should, calling me up, asking me for whatever favor he's about to ask; and I decide he probably doesn't. Feel as shitty as he should. And I'm pissed about that, and pissed that he's just throwing around terms like "Family Days," and why the hell isn't he up at "Family Days" with his own self, not that it would do you any good. But he's still your dad, and I still pretty much love you, I guess, so I say to him, "How are things," and I realize that I'm crouching now, the hammer tapping the toe of my shoe, asking him how things are, "up at the clinic?"

"Moving forward," he says. "It's tough." And that's it. That's all I get. Then there's some hospital mumbo-jumbo about paging Dr. Fuck-All going on where your dad is; he pulls himself together, now, puts on his surgeon's voice like a crisp white coat and asks me, all clinical and condescending, if I remember where your house is. I walk over to the drawer, rest my foot in it, slide it around like it's some ugly-ass shoe. I put my weight on my foot and feel the bottom of the drawer crack, as if I didn't spend half of my summer there, at your house, and he says if he texts me the garage code could I maybe get into the garage and find the big boards stacked against the wall and maybe board up your windows, "just on the oceanfront side," and of course I'll get "appropriate compensation," and he says he can text me the code to the, ah, liquor cabinet, ahem, cough, if I want it, and I can help myself to anything that might help me, ah, "ride out" the storm. Fuck you, sir. And then he offers me money and I turn him down out of some misplaced chivalrous impulse that's really about earning points with your dad, as if he even thinks in those terms, or thinks of me at all as more than some lout to ask favors of. And as soon as I say no, as soon as I turn down the money, I wish that I hadn't. Because I sure as shit could use the cash, it being the off-season and all, and the rent not going down any for us locals and waiting tables not filling the bank, so to speak, when no patrons are patronizing, as we like to say at the office. And I want to spit through the phone on your old man but I say that I'll do it. Because I still hope maybe that you'll be back next summer and you can't come back if your house blows away, and I can maybe stop that from happening, put some boards up so your family's not totally fucked up the ass.

"I have the hammer in my hand already, sir." That's what I say. And I do, I actually *do* have a hammer in my hand, and I tap it against my forehead, wonder if I'd punk out in time if I just swung it as hard as I could at my face. And he says, "Well, ha ha, don't worry about that, son. There's a drill in the garage," and he's drawing me a little verbal map of his toolbox (doesn't *that* sound gay), and an ice cream truck drives by, real slow, with a speaker set up on top. But instead of playing ticky-tack jangle tunes the truck is saying that we have two hours to evacuate, and then they close the bridge. "Evacuate my bowels," Jason yells from our window. The hollow voice drones on, "Don't let your home become your coffin." Then the truck rolls away and repeats its message, and I think, hey, it's Halloween. Coffin me and I'll rise from the dead, motherfucker. The sky is looking real apocalyptic and the streets are all empty and the wind is kicking up. Or maybe it's just a normal windy day. Maybe it will all blow past. And I'd like to take the time to ruminate upon which I'd prefer. The storm. Or the storm blowing past. Because I'm a ruminating kind of guy, I suppose.

But your dad's saying, "We really appreciate it." And I think, *we?* "Be safe out there," he says, in the same way my boss writes on each of our paychecks—our less-than-minimum-wage-because-we-get-such-massive-tips paychecks: "Thank you for all that you do." I almost say to him, Sir, do you even know *my name*?

"Tell June that I," I say, and then lamely I finish, "say hi."

Say hi. Say hi.

When you reached out the car window you made a knuckled little fist and said, "No one cares." And I said, "*I* care." Like all I could do was cry and quote Luke Skywalker's goofiest line instead of saying anything real, and I heard myself saying *I*

care *I* care *I* care, like some horrible .gif synced to play once with every turn of the tires that took you away.

I say *hi*. I say *hi*. I say *hi*.

Well, goddammit.

He's hung up the phone and I'm busting that dinky-ass drawer. And slamming the hammer makes me feel definitely not *good*, but marginally *better*.

Your dad called. You're still alive and I have a job to do. I'm still in the game, I think, which is something. Which is more than life's taught me I've got a right to expect.

I always say, if I'd had the money, I'd be a goddamn competitive athlete. I'd like to be a goddamn competitive *something*.

Competitive BowFlexer? Competitive Hammer Thrower?

Except I tuck my hammer in my pants, go inside to get my wallet and keys.

About two years ago, I helped my brother and his girl paint a bedroom for the kid they had coming.

"Small room," I said. Because I was eighteen, and a jerk.

He laughed and said, "Small kid."

I helped build a crib, too.

Which is all to say, I'm handy. Professional handyman, I could be. That room's still blue, and my nephew can almost talk, now. But my brother—he's gone.

I tell myself this story—some version of this story—a story I never told you. And I walk, with my hammer, to your house, June.

* * *

Beep bop blat boop, and I've breached the garage. The code is—guess what?—your birthday. Zero. Six. Two. Nine. The day when you and I went walking on the beach and we ran into those kids you knew from school, and it turned out I knew one of them, too. "What's good, man," he said, pulling me tight, slapping me on the back. "June," he said to you. "You're full of surprises." You stood behind me and peeked out and said, "Surprise!" We kept walking and I was about to ask you what that was about, but then the kid was jogging after us. "June!" he called out, but he was looking at me. He said, "Hey, man, we're having a party tonight at Lauren's place. You guys should come." I looked back at the girl who must've been Lauren and I looked at you and—even though we had plans to go to The Melting Pot—you said, "Yeah, sure. We'll be there." And then we went, that night, to the party. And this kid, a friend of the kid I knew—we hadn't even made it to the keg—he said to you, "Your boy bring any stuff?" And I shook my head behind your back and made a slicing motion with my hands, tried to say without saying it, "Cut it out, dude." And you turned around, your head tilted and I shrugged and lied and said, "I guess we should've brought beer." But the keg was full and that gave you something to think about. We met a bunch of people and you twirled your hair more than usual, told everyone about the car your Daddy got you for your birthday, this being your sixteenth and all. Which I knew was a lie because that's the car he *said* he would get you if you did something; something that you wouldn't tell me; terms I can guess at, now, I think.

We walked around that party, me feeling out of place in all that pastel, those fresh faces. A girl was walking around, holding a dog under one arm, a beer in the other hand.

I scratched the dog's ears, said, "Wow, what a brave little guy. Just chilling. You're the life of the party," I said to the dog, scratching him under his little white beard.

"Oh," the girl said. "He spends half the year in France. So, really," the girl said, "he's pretty much down for whatever." Oh, I thought. France. When you pulled me into the bathroom, I thought I'd never felt so relieved.

The bathroom tiles were the color of that vanilla ice cream your mom always bought. The one with the tiny little flecks of real vanilla. The thought of ice cream made me realize I was sweating. "Nice kids," I said. "Nice place." There was a small glass jar filled with fancy little whale-shaped bath beads on the back of the toilet. You lifted one out, bounced it between your fingers a bit, squeezed it until it popped. Your hand filled with oil and the room filled with the scent of something. The whale was purple, so maybe, I don't know, lilacs? I was trying to place the scent and I was trying to think of something sexy to say. Because sometimes we had sex in bathrooms like that, at other parties. I started to unbuckle my jeans and you wiped your hand down the front of my shirt and you gave me your hard-ass librarian look, the ball-shriveller. You said, "No." Then you said, "What stuff?"

And I'm like, "What?"

And you're like, "What did he mean, 'Your boy bring any stuff?'"

And then I had to tell you what the "stuff" is. And you said you wanted to try some. And then you said you'd break up with me if I didn't tell you where I get it.

So we went to K. Know's.

I bought you a little present. Even though I'd already given you a Build-A-Bear. A stupid stuffed animal, wearing a stupid little teddy bear tuxedo. Even though the Build-A-Bear, June, was holding out a rose.

There were a lot of things I didn't get. Like when your Mom's new mantra became "Eat Your Colors." And she went on and on about your "vitamin deficiency," and would point to that constellation of bruises on your shins that never really went away but were always morphing. Sometimes I'd find shapes there, like you'd find in the clouds. There's a bird, I'd say, tracing one bruise. There's a dick, I'd say, connecting dot to dot. Your mom would show up with a ball of hair in her hand, and talk about the vitamin deficiency and you'd say, "Stay out of my room, please." And for the most part, as far as we could tell, she did her Zumba, and went golfing with her friends, and she did.

Your Dad came into town three weekends a month. Max. You seemed to not care.

I drank beer, and you drank vodka, and I get it now. You told me you ate at your place, when you came over to mine. And you probably told your parents that you'd eaten with me, when you went back home. I kept fat-free yogurt and Special K around, like you wanted me to. You brought carrot sticks. And when your mom would serve carrot sticks, you'd beg for a hot dog. "Can't I get a tube of hot pig parts?" you'd say. "A hamburger bun of indeterminate vintage?" I thought you were just being funny. Because you can be. Funny. "With moldy overtones," you'd say, "and a sprinkling of soft, stale sesame." But your mom is a health nut, and you'd ask for HoHos, for McDonald's, and I get it now.

I'm responsible for some shit. One time they were out of fat-free so I bought the low-fat. You freaked out, and I should have known, then. I don't own a lot. But I own that.

I'm in the garage and your dad's place-for-everything-everything-in-its-place obsession is on full display. I see the inner tubes, and the beach toys, and the boogie boards, and the vintage surf board that marks your mother's attempt to decorate even this "room." I see the plywood, and, yeah, I'm gonna put it up. But first? I need a drink.

The magnetic Hide-A-Key is right where your dad said I'd find it. In the living room, the liquor cabinet and bar fridge are right where they've always been. *Beep bop blat boop*. Same code.

I drink a beer so I can get to work. And then I do.

The plywood boards are gigantic and I'm wondering if maybe I should have enlisted some help, at least someone who could hold the ladder. There are actually a couple termite tunnels in some of these boards, but I guess your dad is aware of the dangers of storing large amounts of plywood inside your house. I drag a few boards across the fancy mats he has on the garage floor. The ones that keep oil drips off the concrete. I've never seen such a house for fancy gizmos. I flipped through a *Frontgate* catalog a few times last summer when I was sitting around waiting at your house. The twenty-foot mat costs four hundred dollars, which is pretty fucked, considering you have two of them, and considering that the two of them together would cover my rent for almost three months. Considering that all that consideration has gone into protecting a

garage *floor*. The garage floor of a house with a trillion windows. A trillion windows, and a hurricane coming, and your dad's best plan rests on me. He's keeping plywood boards around, shot through with termite holes. Your dad *is* supremely organized, though, I will say that. Each board has a drawing and a label on it, indicating which window it should cover. So I drag one out and I carry it to the big sea-facing porch. Where, Sweet Mother of Jesus, the deck furniture is all still sitting out.

Like today's a summer Sunday, and you've invited me to tea.

I lift the umbrella out of its stand and I wish I could just Mary Poppins out of this shit. Where would I go? Doesn't matter. Just about anywhere else.

Remember when we met? I stank like fish.

I met you at the restaurant, where you sat with your cousins at what was clearly the designated "kids' table." Your headphones on. We play a Jimmy Buffett/Beach Boys mix all the fucking time; an attempt, I suppose, to have zero repeat customers, ever. You were listening to whatever you were listening to, reading a book with one hand, drawing circles on the paper tablecloth with the other. When I brought you your food, you put your book down and cut up your chicken, which I thought was clever. You cut up your food in advance, it seemed, so you only had to use one hand to eat. So your other hand would be free to hold your book. Because knowledge is power. I watched your mother watching you. You put a bite in your mouth. You chewed it. You swallowed. You looked bored to death and I thought that gave me, maybe, a good half-decent chance.

I'd spilled a plate of swordfish down my shirt and I stank like fish and I brought you your cup of tea and you cradled it in both hands and brought it close to your chest like a second hot heart. A thin line of cleavage shot up to your throat and I pointed to you, said to Jason, "Check it out." He said, "Forget it, man."

But then I saw you on the beach the next day, and I was done.

You were walking by yourself, and, again, you were reading.

"Hey," I said, jogging up.

"Hey," you said, not looking.

"What's this?" I said. You closed the book but I peeked underneath, read the title, green letters: *Alien vs. Predator*. "Looks like a good book," I said, matching your stride. "The movie was okay. But the video game is *tight*, am I right?"

You looked at me, bored as the Home Depot lumber department. That's the kind of thing you would say: bored as the lumber department. Boring as a beetle. You gave me that dry look. "Who're you?" you said.

"Gabe Waxman. What's your name?"

"You were my waiter the other day." You didn't say it like it was a question, so I didn't answer. Just lifted my head to say, yeah. At least I don't work at the taffy shop like I used to, when my brother and I first came out to the beach. Before he started playing ball with K. Know. When we were still "assessing the lay of the land," he would say.

"You live here?" you said.

"Yeah."

"Where?"

"An apartment. About twenty minutes away."

We walked in silence for about twenty steps. Twenty steps in which I thought I saw your shoulders gain about twenty new freckles. They multiplied as I counted them. It was June, and I was sweating. I didn't know, then, that your name was June, too. I said, pointing at your book, "You ever play Aliens vs. Predator?"

"No," you said. You gave me a funny look, and said, "You mean, like, the video game?"

"Yeah. Aren't you, like, reading a manual of cheats or something?"

And I rambled on about the game, and the cheats I'd found, and you were sort of listening and sort of thinking about something else, I could tell. So I said again, "So what's your name?" And you said your name was June, and that I could not, under any circumstance, call you June Bug.

"What's a June Bug?" I said. And you smiled.

For some reason (was it *because* I was an idiot?), you said you wanted to play video games. "With you," is what you said. "You can show me how to work the controller." You put your book in your bag and put your hand on my arm and you said, "Could we play, like, now, please?"

Jason and Sneed, on the floor with the blinds drawn. You, on the arm of the couch. Old Bess, oldest couch in the world, always crumby or sandy or salty. When you sat there, I cringed. Resolved to give Old Bess a good vacuum. J. and Sneed were

playing Halo. I ignored how they were checking you out; picked up AVP and held it out to you.

"Why're there scorpions on their faces?"

Sneed hit pause. The creepy pause music filled the room, and it was like we were in a deep, damp cave, like it wasn't the most gorgeous day in the world on the other side of the door and ten blocks down the street.

"How old are you?" Sneed said.

"Sixteen," you said. Which was not quite true, I found out. But you didn't even blink.

Jason gave me the why-not look, so I said what we say. I said, "You want the full tour?" They turned up the volume and started shooting each other. We went to my bedroom and started out with some messing around. Which is not hard to start, when a pretty girl walks into a young man's house, and she's only half-dressed. Which is "why we live at the beach, after all, brah." For the swimsuits, as my brother used to say all the time.

Before I could really get your shorts off you rolled over, picked up the picture in the frame, the one from my bedside table. "Aw," you said, running your palm through the dust on the top. My hand ran over your back, my fingers finding the shallow furrows between your ribs. I should have known, then. But the little rib waves were beautiful, like ripples in some wind-blown sand. You pointed at the frame. "That's you," you said.

"Yeah," I said, taking the picture, rolling onto my back. You tucked yourself in with your head on my shoulder. You pointed at the picture.

"Who's that?" you said.

"K. Knowledge."

"Come again?"

"Don't mind if I do," I said. Which was stupid, being as I hadn't even come yet. I cleared my throat and said, "His name is K. Knowledge."

"As in, on his birth certificate?"

"Sure. K. Knowledge Lewis."

You laughed and your laugh was like your freckles, tiny and everywhere and in the skin of your shoulders and along your collarbone and along the top curve of your breasts.

"How'd he get it?"

"I don't know." You started smiling to yourself. "What's funny?" I said.

"I don't know, I—I just picture his mom, you know, lying in the maternity ward. Pointing at one of those alphabet posters they make for kids. K is for Knowledge. Like she saw that and said, 'Oh, now *there's* a great name.'"

"Hey," I said. "Knowledge is Power."

You laughed. "A is for Apple. B is for Banana. C is for—"

"Pussy," I said. Because I couldn't keep my hands off you. But you squirmed away and said, "A is for Apple. B is for Banana." And you grabbed me, and I was hard, and you shimmied a few feet further down on the bed.

You looked up a minute later. Said, "Am I doing it right?"

And I said, "Woah." I pulled you up and you weighed, like, nothing. "Have you never done this before?"

"No," you said. And you seemed, impossibly, to get smaller. I tucked myself back into my shorts. I held you in my arms. I was feeling perplexed. I put my hand on your hair. It's a big hand. And it was soft hair.

"You were doing fine," I said. "You were doing great. More spit, maybe." I spat on my hand, lifted my hand to your breast. "You mind?" I said. And I rubbed my hand on your breast and then put my mouth on it, slipped my mouth up to your nipple. You shivered.

"See?" I said. You nodded. "You don't have to keep going," I said. I ran my hands through your hair. "I could do that all day," I said, and I did it again. "A girl in a black bikini," I said. "I just figured—"

"Maybe I am," you said. "Easy. Just, no one's ever tried before."

You were sitting on your knees and you were so adorable. And I know it's fucked up to feel like a father, in a moment like that. But I pictured you with little training wheels and streamers coming off your handlebars and I touched your hair and kissed your mouth and pulled you toward me.

"Let go," you said. So I did. I pulled my hands back. But instead of getting out of bed, you pulled my shorts back down. You tried again and, fuck, girl: you're a natural.

After, I rolled over to get the paper towels, because you didn't want to swallow. When I rolled back, you were touching the mess you'd spat into your hand. "Wax Man," you said.

"That's my name."

"Bet I'm not the first person to say that," you said, holding up a wet finger.

I said, “No.” I wiped you off, wiped myself off. “Sorry it’s so rough,” I said. Because the paper towels I buy are always the cheapest brand in the grocery store. You wanted me to snuggle you up. So I did.

“What’s that,” you said, and moved your legs. You pulled the photo out from under the blankets with your toes. It wasn’t broken. I reached over you to put it back on the bedside table. You picked it back up. I heard the pause music for Halo. For all I knew, Sneed had his ear to the door.

You said, “Okay, so that’s K. Knowledge. Now, who’s that?”

I looked at your finger on my brother and I focused on a freckle near your knuckle so I could say, “My brother.” The original Wax Man. Basketball in his hand, like it had been magnetized there.

“He’s handsome,” you said.

“He was,” I said.

You rolled over, placed your hand on my cheek. How long had it been, I wondered, since somebody held me that softly?

You said, “Did he die?”

“No,” I said, and smoothed your hair. “I just mean he was,” I said. “Handsome, that night. I guess.”

You rolled back over, put the photo on the bedside table.

“When was that?”

“Two years ago? New Year’s.”

“You guys baking a cake?”

In the picture, there's white dust everywhere. Because it was New Year's and we had, like, a billion grams of coke somehow. We threw powdered sugar in the air to commemorate. Pretended it was *Scarface*. When that ran out, we threw baking soda. I passed out before they ransacked the granulated. Woke up under the kitchen table. My head itchy, thinking the sugar in my hair was sand.

"Yeah," I said. "We were baking a cake." I couldn't tell if you were pulling my leg, or if I was pulling yours. I tried to remember what I knew, at sixteen. I pulled you tighter. I couldn't see your face, so I wasn't sure if you believed me. "You're a real sweetheart," I said, and I ran my feet up your smooth legs. I set my alarm and we slept for three hours, until I had to get ready for work. "Can I see you again?" I said, pulling on my work pants.

And you said, "Sure. We'll go putt-putt." You were rooting through the covers, your little ass way up in the air. "Where's my bikini," you said. And I rubbed my hands together, said, "Hey, babe. I've got it right here."

And so here I am, moving the chairs you sat in that next day, when I went to your place. I walked up to the porch and you were leaning on the rail, waiting. Your dad was sitting—there—and your mom was SPFing—there—and you said, "Mom, Dad, this is Gabriel Waxman."

Your mom said, "Don't I know you? Are you the new neighbor?"

"Not the neighbor," I said, holding out my hand. "I met your daughter on her walk yesterday."

"Long walk," your Dad said, behind his paper.

"We got ice cream," you lied. "We're going to play putt-putt," you said.

Your mom said, "Back by three. Your cousins are coming over," she said. Then she turned back to me, invited me to your annual all-family paddleball tournament.

"Sure," I said. "Sounds like a blast."

But it *was* fun. Surprisingly. We played your aunt and uncle. And I have to say, for someone who plays in an annual tournament? Girl, you were awful. We lost *bad*. And we never stopped laughing. We built sandcastles with your little cousins and then, when the tide started coming in, we dug big moats to protect them. The kids were running back and forth with their buckets, dumping water in the ocean and digging the moat longer and deeper, as if they actually believed the tide could be held back, as if the castles could be saved. And you and I, we ran back and forth with them. Laughing, like we believed in miracles. Or ourselves.

And when the ocean proved too strong—when you crashed against me, in mock exhaustion and defeat—that was fun, too, of course. The cousins, they started wrecking the castles ahead of the waves, and they were—what—five, six years old? And hilarious. The one who kept her floaties on, even when she wasn't in the water. She ran to us, shouting, "Save me!" And you caught her up and we held her upside-down, and we dangled her over the water, dipping her close to the waves. Lifting, just in time. Saving her, over and over. And I thought, damn, *this* is what it feels like to be on a postcard of some beach-town paradise. I ate a burger at your cookout, one your mom made up from

scratch. She asked me what kind of cheese I wanted on it. Gave me three choices. Fixed it to order. Like it was no big thing to just give food away to delinquents like me.

After dinner, I helped your dad move some planters. There were landscapers coming, he said, the next day. "Which company?" I said.

He looked at me like, why would it matter? "Off the top of my head? Don't know," he said. "How was putt-putt?"

I said, "It was great, sir. We really had a blast."

After, you wanted to snuggle and sleep.

"Wait," I said, pulling on my shorts. Sneed was passed out on his bed, mega-sunburnt. The Dr. Seuss was under his bed, and I got it out, no problemo. There's this thing that Sneed does when he brings a new girl home. He says to the new girl, hey, you know the Truffula tree? And if they do, or if they don't, he grabs a copy of *The Lorax* from under his bed. And he reads it to them, and they call him a sweetheart. Then, when he drops his pants, Sneed says, "A Sneed's a thing everyone, everyone, everyone needs."

Sneed says it's gold, and that's why we have a copy of some kids' book. I think he read it to his nephew, once, and he stole it. But I got it and I didn't tell you all that. I read it to you and we sat up in bed and you said that I'm a good reader. That I have a good voice. "Deep and mellifluous," you said. "You're what, twenty-one?"

"Don't age me, girl. I'm twenty."

"But you have beer in the fridge." I laughed and you said, "Oh, okay. I guess that's stupid."

"It's not hard to get beer," I said. "You want one?"

"No, thank you."

I wasn't sure, so I said, "You ever had one?"

You smacked me hard in the chest. "I just don't want one at," you looked at the clock on my bedside table, "two in the afternoon. Do you?"

I shook my head, no. I don't think I *ever* saw you drink a beer, June. You used to make these smoothies out of ice and Crystal Light. Sometimes, you put vodka in them. You liked K. Know's coke, I think. But not yet.

We'd run out of things to say, so you said, "Read it again."

"You want me to read it *again*?"

"Not really. But you're such a good reader." You tapped on my chest, as if the words grew from there.

"What, you thought I was illiterate?"

"No," you said. "But you're just a waiter."

"Yeah."

And I could've been pissed. But then you said, like no one else ever did, "Okay. But what do you want to *do*, Wax?"

I didn't say anything for a minute. You laced your fingers in mine, brought them to your face, kissed them. You let go, guided my hand to your breast. Put your hand on my pec.

"Wax," you said. "What do you want to do with your life?"

I picked up the picture and looked at my brother. "I don't know," I said. "Go back to school, I guess."

"College?"

"High school first, I guess."

And because I was embarrassed, you changed the subject. "I'm gonna be a Junior," you said.

I laughed. "Yeah," I said. "Okay, Junior."

"I'm a Junior. And you're a Senior," you said.

"Gonna be," I said, correcting you. "Remember? We're on summer vacation."

"Yeah," you said, smiling, glad I was playing along. "I'm a Junior and you're a Senior. Will you take me to prom?"

"Do I have to wear a tux?"

"Yes!"

"Oh, I do, huh? Do I have to wear a tux if I tickle you?"

I was tickling you and your freckles were shaking all over the place, and someone yelled, "Get it, bro," from the other side of the door.

"Fuck off," I yelled back.

"Who was that," you said.

"Fucking Jason."

"Hey, Jason," you yelled, pulling up the covers. "Hey, Jason!"

There was a knock on the door. Like a little queen, you said, "Come in, please."

Jason surveyed the scene, said, "Yo, man, what up."

You said, pointing at me, "Don't let him forget, J. When he buys my corsage, I want *roses*."

* * *

Which is why it's worth putting this wooden lawn chair on my back. Worth lurching down the stairs with it. By the time I've got all the deck furniture in the garage, and all the plywood pulled out and arranged, the wind is really picking up. I decide I'd better do the second floor windows first, while the ladder's still relatively safe. I decide I'll do *your* room first. I find a tool belt, throw a bunch of two-inch screws in the pocket. Tuck the wireless drill inside, stand up the ladder. I carry the piece of plywood up, somehow, one step at a time. This must be something you were attracted to, at least on a subconscious level. You saw me in the restaurant, and you didn't look twice. But when you saw me on the beach I was shirtless. Some animal buried in you—that animal saw my arms, and saw my chest. Said, this man can protect my house and home. The wind catches one side of the plywood and there's a bad moment where I think we're going and I might have to hop on top of it, magic carpet myself back down to earth. But we stay on the ladder and it's only when I get to the top that I realize I can't put the plywood flat against the window. The ladder is resting against the windowsill. I'm completely, as usual, in my own way.

I screw in the two top corners even though the board's not flush with the wall. The drill shoves in—the resistance, and then the slip—and I think about how, when we had sex, by the end of things, you always wanted to be on top. I remember the first time you climbed on top of me and leaned back; how you were so thin I could see the outline of my dick on the front of your stomach; and how you'd press on it.

* * *

Sometimes I have the dream where you're riding me, and I reach up to press on your stomach and your flesh melts off and my hand slides through the center of your pelvis, and I wake up with my dick in my hand.

Sometimes I have a dream where you and me and a black lab are walking through a forest. When we get thirsty, you lie down and take your clothes off. I trace my finger along one curve of your pelvis. As my finger floats above your stomach, across to the opposite hip, a bowl forms, fills with water. The dog and I drink. I bring water from your hips to your mouth in my hands. You sit up on your elbows, and you drink. You pull your clothes back on and get up and keep walking. This is a dream I think about, when I'm lying in bed. I close my eyes, hope I have it again. And again.

This is how you got me: by lying with me in the dark, sharing broken pieces of yourself. Making me laugh at my own cracks and crises.

You told me about getting a dog, then having your parents take it away. As if the dog was a Barbie and not a living, breathing thing, not a friend.

I told you about wanting a dog, not letting myself get one until I know I can take care of it. "That's sweet," you said.

"Well," I said. "I've seen too many—too many shitty things."

I told you about my brother and me getting a dog when we lived together. How I miss that dog every fucking day.

You did not ask me if I miss my brother.

You asked, "What was the dog's name?"

This is what I didn't say. We used to walk past this yard, my brother and I. Back in Baltimore. On the edge of Little Italy, on our way into the harbor. And this sweet little pit, she—in all kinds of weather—she would always be out there, always running at the fence. Always straining for the gate. Almost strangling herself. It was horrible to watch. But we had to walk past, so—we did. If you went up to the *side* of the fence, though, she'd walk up to you. Lick your hand through the links. Eat your pepperoni stick, if you brought her one. My brother had some bolt cutters, cut the chain one night, just a few nights before we were planning to leave. I opened the gate. Crouched down. "Here, girl," I said. And I swear to God, when she reached that spot where the chain would yank her back, I swear to God, her eyes went wide and she *smiled*. She ran right through it, practically flying. Definitely smiling.

It will always be one of the best times of my life, June. To hear her dragging the loose end of that chain. To hear her feet pad beside me.

Her collar said, "Blade."

I held you, and said, "Her name was Jade."

I did tell you about my brother's first day of fifth grade, the first First Day of School I can remember. How I was the one who cried, not my mother. Definitely not my brother. I remember standing at the door, crying, seeing him walk toward the school bus. Remember his Power Rangers backpack growing smaller and smaller with each step he took. I remember holding my mother's hand. And you took mine, then, and made my fingers into a bracelet around your wrist.

"Where is he," you said.

"I don't know," I said. "But at least I have you, now." I untouched and re-touched my fingers. You moved them in their bracelet all the way up to your armpit, and then back down.

"Am I beautiful?" you said. And then you cried.

Last night I had a dream where a blonde wig without a face was floating next to me. Over and over and over, the wig said, "The path is set. Landfall is inevitable. Only a matter of time."

The top two corners of the board are secure. I climb down the ladder, sweating in my hoodie.

It was outside this window, right here. When I heard your parents blame each other. Your dad said, "Well, how could I know? I'm never here." And your mom said, "Exactly."

The ice cream truck drives down your street, too. Its speakers are off, now. It doesn't stop to make any announcements.

"They want to send me away," you said. "Let's run away. We can go to Vegas."

"Someone told me, once," I said to you, "if you understand Vegas, then you understand America." That someone was my brother. We played poker every Tuesday night, and my brother always crushed. His stacks of chips making a little cityscape, the

city always growing. And as his stacks got bigger, so did his dreams. And so did his mouth. "We'll go to Vegas," he'd say. "Open a little pizzeria," he'd say. "Serve by the slice. Sling on the side. Make a killing." His eyes would still be on his cards, but I could see them lose focus, drift away somewhere.

"There goes the Wax Man," K. Know would say. "Waxing grandiose, again."

In K. Know's parlance, my brother was always waxing *something*. Waxing poetic. Waxing philosophical. Waxing his chest, just like K. Know did.

Now it's just his memory. Waning.

And me, wondering. My brother and K. Know. Was something going on there? Is that what the swagger's for? Covering up the gay? I thought about asking you. But then I'd have to ask you some other things, too. Like how do *you* know K. Know's straight?

You said, "Well, *do* you understand it?" It took me a second to realize, understand *what*? Oh, right. Vegas. "Please, Wax," you said. "Let's go!" You said you'd go without me, if I didn't say yes.

"We can't afford Vegas," I said.

"We can live in a storage unit," you said. As if that was really a viable option.

I said, "No."

"I saw it on the news," you said. "We can have a little hot plate, and—"

"*No*, I said."

You put both hands on my arm. "My mom keeps her rings in a pocket of a certain dress in her closet," you said. "I know which dress," you said. "I can bring

them." And then you gave me the puppy dog eyes, said, "Please." You said, "Please please please, Wax. We'll get married in Vegas, and—"

You wouldn't shut up, June.

So I hit you.

What I big man I was. I hit you, and I burst into tears. You? You crawled on my lap. Holding your face. I hurt you.

"I never got a puppy, even." That's what I said, before I even said, I'm sorry. "I can't afford a puppy, June."

"I know," you said. "I'm sorry, Babes. I'm so sorry."

"If there's a ring involved, I want to *buy* it," I said. "*I'm* sorry." Still, though. You were holding your face, and it was my fault. "It's not *right*," I said, "if you can't do it *right*."

And you, holding onto me. Calming me down. You said, your forehead on mine, "I'm not a puppy, Wax."

"I know," I said. "You're so much more than a puppy. That makes it worse."

I lean my head against the cool rung of the ladder. I take the ladder and slide it out from where it's trapped, under the plywood. I place the ladder on top of the plywood and climb back up to do the bottom two corners.

Only once did you ask where my brother was. Part of me thinks that K. Know told you. Part of me thinks, we should've gone to Vegas. Should've searched the pizzerias. Should've found him. 'Cause what if he's as lost, out there, as I am, here?

* * *

I have to reverse the top corner screws to get the plywood to lie flush against the window. I think about that first time I took you to K. Know's. The screw swirls out.

"And this," I said, "is K. Knowledge." You shook his hand.

You said, "You're skinnier than the picture." I covered your mouth and you bit my palm and I bit your neck and you said, "Ouch."

I said, "Never tell a man he's looking skinny."

"Sorry," you said with a smile. "Just, I'd love someone to say that to me."

Which I thought was a normal girl thing to say, and besides, I was distracted. Because then K. Knowledge looked at you, up and down. And I had to put my arm around you and say, "Don't look at her like that, man."

"What's your name?" he said. Though he already knew it.

"June," you said.

"No, baby," K. said. "You August."

You grinned and said, "August?"

And K. said, "Hottest month in town."

"Knowledge is Power," I said, and smiled at K.

He said, "Keg's out back. You two kids, you have fun."

And K. Know slipped something in my pocket, and I took it, later. And I took you to the bathroom, and we *did* have fun.

Not long after your birthday, you called and said, "I'm at K. Know's."

"Since when do you go to K.'s?" I said, already lacing up my shoes.

"Just come," you said. And I did. But not fast enough.

I got there, and you were already high. I asked, "What'd he give you?" As if giving it a name made it something I could manage. "I need to take a shit," you said. And pulled me, laughing, to the bathroom. Where you took a shit. And made me look at it.

Sometimes I put my earplugs in and I say *la la la* to all the bullshit. Sometimes I wear them for days at a time. But then I close my eyes, and I still see what I see.

Do you ever close your eyes, see things in those spots that swirl in the dark, there?

I watched you take a shit, and you pulled up your shorts. Pulled me over and said, "Look, Wax. How much does it weigh, you think? I just want to lose," you said, tugging on my arm. "I just want to lose one percent. One percent of me."

When I miss you, I think of that time in your room. When you closed the A/C vent so you could sit without a sweatshirt on. You sat in front of your window and you read to me. Read children's books, from the pile that you called your "nostalgia stack." They were books I didn't know. *The Big Orange Splot*. *Miss Rumphius*. *Harold and the Purple Crayon*. The sunshine through the windowpanes made a plaid blanket on your shoulders. We gave each other spirit animals. You were a canary. I drew it on your wrist. You said I couldn't be a bird, that my wings would be wax. So I was an inchworm.

You were going to fly to my branch. I was going to climb on your head. I was going to be—what did you call it?—your little green hat.

The plaid moved across your body, spread onto my feet. "Do you know," you said. "That birds have hollow bones?"

I don't know how much it weighed, June. I don't know how much your shit weighed. It was one of those long, tattered summertime shits. It trembled in the bowl like a small, flayed weasel. Tomato skins flapping. Corn kernels sinking, floating, sinking, floating, spinning away like loosed satellites in a milky way of slimy brown something. Your mom was serving a fucking garden at every meal, practically flying the food at you, making weird back-of-the-throat noises. She'd putt-putt a spoon in your direction, as if you were still a baby. You were sixteen. "If she's going to treat me like an infant," you said, "then I'm going to be one." You asked me to buy ExLax. And the ExLax and all that fiber, they made your food into a big old diapery mess. I stood and stared down at it. Looked at you, your pupils huge and dark. "How's it going in there," someone yelled. A cloud of toilet tissue passed over the mess. You flushed it all down. "Raw," you shouted back, lathering your hands. You looked in the mirror, said "raw" again, and met my eyes. And your eyes were black, and sometimes golden, and they were hungry. "Raw," I said, holding onto your hips like they were handles. The bathroom smelled terrible. But I'd been here other times. Other times it smelled worse. You flicked water in my face. "Gimme your lighter," you said. You lit the candle that sits on the back of K. Know's toilet. Even though you'd just pulled up your panties, you said, "Wax. I want to give you a present." Which maybe referred to your birthday, something, whatever, I don't know. I didn't care. I pushed them back down. You held onto the faucet knobs. We fucked over the sink like two people who'd just met and fallen in love over some cooked-up shit in a bathroom somewhere. Someone knocked on the

door and you knocked on the sink and I knocked on you; and I don't know if you remember, June, but it was *hot* that night. I mean, we were. You were high and I was sober, and maybe that reversal was part of the heat. Like, maybe I am not the only one who's lost, here. And you told me to come inside you, and I watched your shoulderblades rise up off your back, and I should have pulled out, but I came. You dug your fingernails into my arms like they were little shovels. Like my skin was hard, packed sand, and you were digging a trench.

And they kept knocking and we let them wait. You wanted a bath. So we had one. You went underwater. After awhile, I pulled you up. The ocean was waiting, just outside, June. And they were waiting outside the door and you said—I don't know if you remember this, June, but you, wiping water off your face, said, "I'm melting."

I said, "Fuck K. Know."

Fuck K. Know. I'll say it again.

And he was jealous, June, when we came out. Damp, and you, stumbling. Jealous, and I got the sense that he was watching, that he was looking at both of us. And we didn't look at him. We went straight out the door.

The last screw goes in, a little deep, maybe. I have four corners in, now, and I tighten the top ones. I lean my face on the plywood, breathe an enormous sigh of relief.

I look down the wall and, from the angle that I'm at, the house seems all windows, an endless line of glass to cover and insufficiently protect. I need a condom, magnum magnum, to cover the whole goddamn house. Or a world condom, maybe. To keep the ocean spray off. I take a few breaths, hugging myself close to the wall. The

wind is getting scary, girl. And the clouds are getting mad. Me? I'd like to sit on the beach down there, naked, with you. Let the sand scour us. Sleep in your bed, not waking, not fucking. Holding hands. Sleep for days. And then? We'd have breakfast. You would eat.

I wanted our story to be about more than sex, June. I wanted it to *mean* something. What I think it means is that the world is mean, June. The waves pound behind me and they don't stop. And they won't.

I wanted our story to mean something. I kept hoping someone new would get in it, someone who would save us. I lie against the ladder, with my face against the board. I keep thinking I'll turn around. And there will be a guy there. With a basketball under his arm and a dog off the leash. And the guy will say, "Looks like you might need a hand." And it won't be a question, so I won't answer it. He'll just grab the other ladder. We'll put our ladders on either side of a window. We'll carry up the board together. We'll screw it in. One, two, three, four. The whole thing will take five minutes, tops.

Then we'll do the next one. And the next one, and the next, and every time the wind blows, the dog, Jade, she'll try to out-howl it. We'll do all the windows, even the back of the house. And then this guy, he'll say to me, hand on my shoulder, he'll say, "Time to quit, bro. Wind's picking up." And we'll close the garage and we'll go get some coffee and I'll tell him about all parts of my life that he's missed.

I rest my face against the board. Then I climb down the ladder, and I quit.

I'm not going to die, boarding up your house, June.

You're killing yourself. Slowly. And maybe I am, too. But I'm not going to die on a ladder, at your house, June. Not without you.

* * *

That one board that's up there, it hangs a bit off-kilter. But you're wrong if you think I don't give a shit about the holes in your window frames. About the windows, about the whole house. There's this weird thing that girls do. When they kiss a guy and suddenly they're buying wedding magazines, reading wedding blogs. I think guys do it, too. They kiss a girl, and then they start wanting to live in her house.

The rest of the boards, I bring back inside. I close the garage door behind me. I go inside and I have another beer.

It's a weird house, generically nice so it's rentable. There are double closets in every room. One for your family, with a lock. One for the renters. I take a long, hot shower in your bathroom. I lie in your bed; but without you there, it doesn't really feel like your room. All of your stuff has been put away, and the cleaners have been through, and it could be a bedroom in any classy rental in town. I look in the corners of your room for something, anything, that the vacuum didn't find. In the back of a drawer, I find a hair tie. You always had one around your wrist, and I put this one around mine. Too tight. I wrap it around my ring finger, double; it's too loose. I put it around my big toe, decide that'll do. I try your birthday as the code to your dad's closet. I find an Ocean City t-shirt that says, "I got crabs." I find some sweatpants, Nike, and a sweatshirt, Polo.

And there's a swimsuit, Tommy Bahama. I put it on. I crank up the hot tub. I run the other tubs, too, so they're full of clean water. I think I might squat here, for a while, defend the place from post-Mandy looters. I'll be on the front lines of the storm,

here. But here's where they'll restore the power first, if they can. In the nice neighborhoods, the power lines are all buried underground.

I think about my neighborhood, and how sometimes the parking lot floods. How the water will start rising, soon. And I think about the lady that lives below us, and her baby. Someone else's problem. I grab a bottle, turn the bubbles up with the hot tub remote. The wind is picking up. I sit in the hot tub and remember how you pressed yourself against the jets and made yourself come. Your dad was always away. And your mom? I guess she played night golf.

The wind is screaming, now, and there are big things moving out there. It's pretty dark, and I feel like I'm standing in the middle of a highway, wearing black. Hearing large, solid shapes veer around me at the very last second.

I think about K. Know's party. Every Halloween, dude wears a white trash bag with the word DOUCHE written across it. Makes a trash bag do-rag for his head. He walks around saying, "Hey, what's good, man. Hey, man, don't you fucking *love* Halloween? Girls all around acting slutty, and we've got a free pass to be douchebags, brah." Every year some girl snuggles up, fingers his plastic sack. Bats her Kardashian eyes, says, "K. Know, you *always* a douche." And K. Knowledge, no apologies, he'll say, "No doubt." Then everyone laughs, and he's got his arm around her and it seems that he's set for the night. Every year, the same old shit. And K. Know, old Keno, he always says to me like he's playing Big Brother, says, "Hey, Gabe, don't forget, brah: Knowledge is Power." Holds his fist out for a pound. Well, fuck me, is that a threat? Knowledge *is* power. I know exactly what I'm missing, over there. And I'm over it.

And what are you doing, June? You guys dress like skeletons or scarecrows or Twiggy or something?

I sit in your hot tub and drink your dad's bourbon and I see something orange fly through the air. I think it's a basketball. Then it smashes on the wall and I realize the wind is so loud that I didn't even hear it smash, and as it slides to the ground I realize, that's not a basketball. It's someone's carved Halloween pumpkin. And there's a triangle eye, still intact, staring at the sky. I duck my head under the suds. All of a sudden, all the noise cuts out. I think, oh, fuck, I'm in the eye of it. The eye of the storm. Turns out, was just the power cutting off. The jets going dead. I climb out and I scramble inside.

I stand against your big glass doors and watch the storm come on. Lightning spasms through the room, lights up waves that look dirtier and sudsier and angrier than my laundry in the wash.

My phone rings a few times. K. Know and Jason and this girl who sucked my dick once and thus thinks we should be together because of that. I turn the ringer off, but it doesn't matter. After those three, the calls stop coming.

I made a lot of money selling K. Know's shit to those kids from your school. And you got a bit more popular, I think. Am I right?

* * *

But before we ran into those kids on the beach. Before you started getting high to help you get thin. You liked me. You put your hand on my chest, and said, "Yeah, but Wax. What do you want to *do*?"

I made a lot of money, but a lot of money is relative, of course. Your living room is generically baller, professionally cleaned. Floors professionally waxed. Appealing to anyone, everyone. The plasma. The marble tiles. The chandelier made from cowrie shells. The little touches a poor kid like me notices: dozens of rolls of toilet paper, toilet paper that never runs out. A price tag on a jar of sauerkraut: $10.95. Other rich people details: the cords for the electronics, all tucked away. Tupperware made out of glass. Other things, too. Things I'm sure I'm not rich enough to even notice.

We walked away from your family, that day, said we were going to play putt-putt. You took my hand and said, "Are your friends home?" When I shook my head you said, "I forgot my SPF. I guess we'll have to stay inside."

"Ah," I said.

"I want to have sex," you said.

"Isn't that a little fast," I said. "Considering we only just met, really, yesterday?"

That's when you should have said, "You're the test dummy, dummy."

But instead you said, "I thought about you all night, Wax."

You were fucking K. Know, by the end of it, weren't you?

You were.

Remember when you asked me, "How many calories are in come?"

I think K. Know knows where my brother is. They were best friends. Or something. Maybe my brother knew something, something K. Know didn't want us to know. I know, if he'd been planning to leave, he'd have left me a note. I know it. You don't just walk your dog, and keep walking. I ask, and I ask. But no one's telling me shit.

Knowledge is Power, hey? You want to really know something?

You were thinking, I can't wait *until* I get away from This Shit. And I was thinking, I don't know *how* to get away from This Shit. I don't know *if* I'll get away from This Shit. Which is what you might call, I guess, an ocean of difference.

I think my brother's in Vegas, maybe. Or Japan. Those are the places he talked about. Or jail, maybe. Or dead, even. He didn't even bring his basketball. All I can say is, he better still have that fucking dog. Fucking Jade.

The room's still painted blue. My nephew, he's still there. I go over, sometimes. "Babysitting for a friend," I'd say. You thought it was cute, when I did that. But you never asked, "Can I come?" You never said, "Who's the friend?"

I watched a TV show, once, about these sushi chefs in Japan. Until Sneed came in and said to me, "Food Network, Gabe? Ever notice how *Gabe* rhymes with *gay*?"

Ever notice how it doesn't?

If I just started swimming, how long would I last?

I'd have to get to California, first, to swim to Japan.

What the fuck is it about names, and nicknames, and June that's hotter than August. And K. Knowledge, who, yeah, has some savvy. But he's not exactly learned, right? And Sneed, with his Thneed, and Jason, or J., or Joint, or just plain Blunt. My brother called him BJ once and J. said, "Aw, fuck," and my brother said, "No, man, like BJ Armstrong." And I said, "Who's that?" And my brother said, "Naw, man. Forget it." Like it's *my* fault Mom waited six years to have me. And like it's *my* fault that, by the time I was born? All the money for NBA trading cards? That money'd been smoked.

Then there's me, Waxman. Named after an angel, my mom said. But no one calls me Gabriele, like they say in Italian. One lady. One lady at Vaccaro's, the Italian pastry shop near where we came up. No one else calls me Gabriel or even Gabe, really. Except my brother, before he left. And K. Know, now. And Wax, hey, that's for ears, or for candles. For sex games, or for cheesy tourist trap museums where you can take your picture with Arnold Schwarzenegger. For melting wings. For letting someone else stamp her name on your body. Back when you're still warm. Still soft. Before you harden up.

I stand at the door and wait for the flashes of lighting. I wait for the wind to send something through the door, some piece of sand fence, some sheet of corrugated metal. I press myself against the glass, wait to be impaled. The waves are getting high out there,

and when the lightning strikes, I can see they're the grey-green color of some lichen. Mandy's getting close. The door is shaking in its frame, or the frame is shaking. The wind is playing the holes between the buildings like your block is a harmonica. There's whistling, and train noises, and the wind is a million different people in Times Square on New Year's Eve, spinning noisemakers in a snowstorm. The wind is filled with water, and the water's hurled at the walls and I hear something crash on the deck and I put my hands against the wall and, I swear, I can feel the wall flexing. When the lights flash outside again, I see two trick-or-treaters. There's an explosion, to the left, a muffled sizzle-bang. The trick-or-treaters are gone. I hear some glass shatter. I'm surprisingly calm. I grab a few beers, a bag of chips. Your dad's closet is on the first floor, no window. I close as many doors as I can. With the light from my phone, I build a nest.

We like to put names on things. Knowledge is Power, right? There's nothing to do, but I can't sleep. So I play with my phone. I type *Alien Vs. Predator, book*. And there it is. Black cover, green letters. It's a book of fucking poetry.

I throw my phone across the room.

There's a thud. Something hits the wall behind me. I scuttle to the other wall, dragging my nest. In your parents' bedroom, I know that there's a couch. I drag its cushions to the closet, set them up around me. I drink my last beer and pretend that I'm five, playing Fort.

When I wake up, it's quiet and dark. I forget where I am. There's a door, and I open it, and there's light from the window. I'm in your house, June. The storm is gone.

My toe is purple and numb. I tear off your hair tie. I have a headache. But—of course—you have Advil. The branded kind. The mega-bottle. I take four. The sky's still grey, and the wind's still gusting. But the rain has mostly stopped. I walk around your house. It, and I, have emerged, mostly whole. One of your gutters dangles like a rope. One of your deck doors is shattered. I step in and out of your house without opening a door. There's sand inside, and glass, and a puddle. Other than that, nothing too terrible. In your hot tub, there's a dead squirrel. The lid is gone. There's a bathtub in your neighbor's yard, a tree through their roof. I get the ladder from your garage, and one of the larger boards. I board up the broken door, un-board your window. From the top of the ladder, I fling the board into the dunes. There's still a good breeze going. It sails pretty far.

I try to get into your mother's closet, but she has a different code.

I pack up the liquor. I dream about leaving one bottle, the gin, your dad's favorite. Putting a surprise in it. A squirrel paw. Some puddle water. Instead, I just pack it up, too.

I find my phone, text your dad. "Just checked on your place. More or less ship shape. One damaged door. I'll put a fresh board on that, take the other boards down. Oh, and fuck you." I delete that last part. I hit Send and walk home with my box.

The city's pretty fucked, it seems.

One house on your block, it actually burned to the ground.

Another block down the beach, and there's a wall, from a house. Lying next to the house. The wall's windows? Every one had been properly boarded.

No sand on the beach. Just the hard-packed base layer with the dirty black swirls. There's a bike in a tree. There's a tree in a truck in the middle of the street. The fishing pier? Completely shattered. In the marina, there's a pile of boats, like the ocean tipped up, sent them sliding to a corner. I walk around an air conditioner the size of a Jeep. It's wedged in the sidewalk, its fan slowly spinning. It's a long walk.

A car buried in sand. I guess that's where the sand went.

A child's plastic beach bucket, rolling in the street.

Bare root balls, twice as tall as I am. Grass, like a towel, draped over the roots.

Wrapped around a stop sign, there's a cat. What *was* a cat, anyway.

I trip. The asphalt's buckled. I look up at a church steeple, the walls of the church ripped off underneath. The structure still stands on some spindly legs. Like a praying mantis. A flag flaps. I think, there's tomorrow's front-page photo.

Really, it all starts to blend. On my street, the sneakers that were hanging from the telephone wire are *still* hanging from the telephone wire. Now they're low enough, though, that I can untangle them.

There's our door, and it's open.

There's a tree down, across the flooded parking lot. It takes me right to our stairs. I don't even have to get my shoes wet.

On the stairs, a pair of cotton grey leopard print underpants.

In our apartment, Jason lying on the floor. I think to myself, man, he's dead.

Jason rolls over, scrapes his eyes. "What's good?" he says.

Like nothing even happened, like he was just waking up after any old bender. There's a lamp, knocked over. A poster, ripped in half. But that could be any old Sunday.

This time yesterday, we were sitting on this couch. I came back in the house, and Jason said, "Jeez, Wax. You really took it to that drawer." He was watching some video. I sat on this couch, on Old Bess. Who never did get her vacuum.

But I'll do it today. Or tomorrow.

"Mandy Moore," Jason said, lifting his chin to the screen. "In honor of the coming storm." He handed me a beer, and we toasted, and we watched, together, as Mandy sang a song about candy. It must have been an old one. She wasn't as busty as she is these days. She looked, in the video—well, I remember thinking, June, that she looked a lot like *you*. Give or take ten or so pounds.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket. "Guess who that was, dude," I said. Checking my calls. Making sure I hadn't made it up.

Jason said, "No fucking clue. Was it K.?"

"June's dad," I said. "Asking me to board up their house."

Jason hit the pause button. "Asking *you?*" he said. "Fuck that shit." I said nothing and he said, "You did say, 'Fuck that shit,' did you not? Did you not, Wax?"

I did not.

I got a text, with the garage code. Your birthday. And I had a sense, June. I had a sense that you're headed somewhere where my brother's gone already. I had a sense, June, that I'll never see either of you again. Mandy walks out the diner door.

A text comes in, from K. Know. "What's good, my brother?"

Another one: "Come around tonight."

I read the next one to Jason. "K. Know says, 'I got some of the *good shit*. Finest New York bagels, if you know what I mean.'"

"Aw, hell yeah," Jason says. He doesn't look up. He's in full-on nostalgia mode, has moved onto Britney, that video of her in the red plastic jumpsuit, dancing on Mars.

K. Knowledge, he says, "I know you been kinda low, Gabe. I got the cream cheese, too. You should try it."

"Cream cheese," I type. Three question marks.

"You know," he replies. "Stick with me, baby boy. You know Knowledge is Power."

"Fuck that shit," I say to Jason. From the floor, he nods and says, "That's right." He opens and closes one fist, with his eyes closed. I think about his theory on rich girls. Why they want you when they do, and all the homegirls he says that would do me, right now, this instant, *today*. If I'd just open my eyes. Sneed's sister being the first on the list, though I probably wouldn't want to go there even if I was desperate. Would I, bro? Not that I wouldn't want to because of *her*, he always says, because, *goddamn*, that tongue ring; but because of *him*, fucking Sneed, who'd have my balls hanging from the license plate on that motherfucking bike of his. I set my box of assorted liquors down on the coffee table. The coffee table wobbles. I look across the room to where the motorcycle sits. But anyone else, Jason always says. Anyone else. He'll list off five people. Anyone else I could have.

I pick at a thread on Old Bess. Jason struggles to sit up. He looks at the box, picks up a few bottles. Looks at the labels, puts them down again. Says, "Looks like Old Mandy dredged up a treasure chest."

I look around the room. This is where we live. There are so many cords, for so many kinds of devices. When's all this shit gonna go wireless? And when it fucking goes wireless, great. We'll have to buy new fucking everything. Or live with these cords.

"We've got a real cord situation here," is what I say, gesturing at the power bars and adapters and the DVD player and the VHS for Sneed's sister's collection of Disney movies, for when her kid who calls me gay comes over to stay; and video game controllers and consoles, even a Super Nintendo that Jason picked up somewhere, swears he'll find games for, like Super Mario, maybe, or Donkey Kong. Though Sneed says we can't bring Donkey Kong into the house or his sister will figure out why he calls her DK—which he does 'cause her head's so goddamn fucking big. And though the name is fitting I'm not sure it is appropriate, especially for him to say in front of the kid. There's every cord in the world, down there, all tumbled together. I see the one Jason was using just yesterday, the one that hooks your computer up to the TV. So you can watch Mandy, or Britney, or some big screen porn for some Real Big Titties, if that's what you're into. I do use that cord, sometimes. If I'm home alone. Throw June's Facebook albums up on the big screen. So I can see her and me together. Still smaller than life-size, but big enough. Me and June building a sandcastle. Me and June on the Fourth of July. Me and June on either end of a hot dog, which *is* a bit gay, maybe; or just cute, depending. Me and June. I run my hands over Bess' florals. Poor old Bess. The couch is getting almost

crunchy. When you stand up, you always have to rub off the backs of your thighs. Don't even think about pulling out the cushions. There's probably cords in there, too. "A real situation," I say, flicking the male end of one of the cords. "I mean, it's pretty ridiculous."

Jason reaches for a paper bag that lies on its side beside him. He pulls out some fries.

"Chill, Mama Wax," J. says. "Sneed says he's on it."

"Yeah," I say. "I know what Sneed's on." I kick the little table and it shudders. I picture all the bottles crashing out and breaking. I picture the woman who lives below us. She's standing in her flood, her baby on her hip. Looking at her ceiling, watching the stain spread. Opening her mouth to catch a few drips.

"Should of seen what he was on last night, brah," Jason says. "Titties out to here," he says, but doesn't move his hands. "Didn't have such a bad haul myself," he says. And he rolls back over and he passes back out.

We swagger a bit, about that kind of bullshit. But the woman below me is catching drips, in my mind. And I am getting pretty tired, frankly, of Sneed's needs, his revolving door and the things I have to hear through my wall. You woke up once, shook me awake, said, "Wax, I'm scared." The girl on the other side of the wall, she'd scream on a regular interval, *ah, ah, ah, ah*. Amplified and accompanied, occasionally, by a loud slap. *My, my, legs,* she yelled. And you shivered in my bed—you were always so cold—and your teeth were chattering when you finally said, "Make it stop."

I got the idea from your mom, actually. I went out and got myself some earplugs. I think I could be a better person, if I didn't have to know all this shit. I'm tired of

hearing the crap that I hear, and I'm tired of it existing, and I'm tired of fighting it. And Sneed. He's got a sister and he hates her baby daddy's guts. Maybe he should hang *that* guy's balls from his bike. Or his own. Maybe. Maybe if he weren't such a fucking blind man, Sneed, he'd see what he's up to. And maybe he'd quit.

I take the Bombay to my room. I wonder, how long would it take, to swim to Bombay? I realize, I don't even know if Bombay's on the coast.

We're not oceanfront, here. But everywhere in town, you hear the surf. Even when you can't hear it, you can hear it. Like we're in a giant seashell.

But who's listening?

The surf is still pounding, turning over glass bottles, and shells, and potato chip bags. Lost flip-flops, and kayak paddles, and paddleball balls. Shark bones, and dog bones, and the lid to your hot tub. And waterlogged beach reads, and condoms, and old cars, and tires; and a body or two, I'm sure we'll find out, when the tallies are tallied and the post-Mandy lay of the land is assessed. The surf is picking things up and turning them over. Ruminating. And then the surf thinks, fuck it. You're all becoming sand.

The power's still out. I stole a t-shirt from your giant teddy bear. The one you said you used to wear, the first summer that your parents brought you out here. It's yellow. It has a rainbow on it. I slip it over my pillow and lie down. The stain on my ceiling turns blue and changes shape, every time I lift the bottle.

Underwater, under the waves, your edges would disappear.

Once you said to me, “Look.” You swung your arms behind your back and you twisted them up and your shoulder blades flew out and you grabbed them. And you said, “Hey, look, Wax. I’ve got wings.”

Wings

Sara flips the cleaver back and forth in her hand. The dull edge hinges in her palm, nestled in the crease of what her palmist calls the heart line. Two days ago, Sara told her husband about the palmist—over the phone, of course, because over-the-phone is what they're doing these days. It's not good for her energy, to communicate by means of devices. "Don't Tweet," her palmist says. "Listen to the tweeting of the birds." Sara's sacral chakra needs attention. When she spoke to her husband, she held the rose quartz pendant in her hand. It was heavy and cool, like a single egg from the Styrofoam carton in the fridge.

The palmist had said, "You need shift. Surround yourself with positive crystals. Next year holds a lot of shift for you." On Friday, home, and happy hour tipsy, Sara called her husband; tried to tell him about the lifeline, about the hash marks in her skin, about a kind of line a woman *wants* to have. "Wait, what?" Will shouted, when Sara started telling him. His voice was hot, forced above the noise of some Friday night bar scene. Sara remembers thinking, he could be drinking two doors down. He could be twenty miles away, or two hundred. "You have a palmist?" her husband said, moving away from the music. Sara heard a door open, then close, cutting off the music off. "Really, Sara? A palmist? Gosh, that's great, Sara. That's just super fucking great."

The pale pink stone lies hot against her throat, today. The cold metal of the blade flips in her left hand. The wooden handle twists it, in her right.

"You've been drinking," Sara said.

"No shit," Will said. "It's called 'Friday.' I am having a beer." He said it in the hyper-articulated way he'd developed in college, the two a.m. argument voice—the one that led to fighting, then great sex. Great sex if they're under the same roof, which they aren't. Her husband has an apartment somewhere. Sara knows the landlord's name, knows he's a friend of hers. When the checks are cashed, a scanned copy of the check appears in her bank account. Their names, her address—up in the top left corner. Her husband's slanted handwriting, pixelated on the screen. Sara's been on Elavil for a few months now. She's been sleeping a lot, has been drinking lots of water. Sara looks at her palm. Flips her hand over. Her skin, she thinks, has never looked better.

"Yep," her husband said, carrying on in the same voice. "A beer. Then another beer. And then I'll have another." Sara listened through the phone, as he drank one. "Not that Kool-Aid you've been downing," Will continued. "Look, Sara, I love you. But it's like astrology. A palmist? That's hippie-incense bullshit, and you know it. You'll hear what you want to hear. She'll see what she knows you want her to see." Sara closes her hand around the blade. "They take advantage of you," he said. "Just think. Just think if I'd walked up to you. If I'd said, 'Hey, babe. What's your sign?' You would have laughed in my face." Will was right, of course. And Sara knows she's susceptible. She cries at the movies. She's easily manipulated by commercials. It doesn't matter if the commercial is for diapers or the Marines. Sara is very pro-life. Pro-America. What does that mean, exactly? It means she likes hot dogs. Sara remembers the night that they met, remembers seeing Will by the barbeque. He flipped a burger, not even looking at it. Pressed his spatula down on the meat; said, looking right at them, "Hey, nice tits."

"A man who speaks the truth," she said. "I like that." Sara was wearing her USA bikini top, a flag as a skirt. It was Labor Day. A perfect day, weather-wise. Classes hadn't started, yet, but everyone was back in town. They were in college. He was shirtless. She had her pearls on.

Sara still wears the pearls. She's a woman of tradition. She's seen the world—or at least all of the world that she's interested in seeing. Her friends are the sons and daughters of prominent people, or rich ones. Her husband, their children—when they have them—will be prominent, too. Will's in business school, now. Sara supports him. Not financially. He won't let her, though she could. What she does is "fight the good fight," as Will calls it, "on the home front." Sara makes a mean white-balsamic-vinegar-instead-of-mayo potato salad. She makes a mean bouillabaisse. She sets a nice tablescape.

Sara's twenty-eight. She renovates, and redecorates. Then she blogs about it.

She's not the type to fall in with this—as Will calls it—"palmistry crap." But lately, for a year or so, now, Sara's been feeling unsettled. Two days ago, through the phone, she just let her husband talk at her. "Okay, fine," Will had said. "It's total hippie-incense bullshit, I just want you to know that. But tell me. Go ahead. What'd she tell you?" He paused. Sara heard him take another drink. "All my fault, right?"

"We didn't talk about you," Sara said. "We talked about me."

"Great," Will said. "And she told you—what exactly *did* she say was the problem?"

"Well, first of all," Sara said, "nothing's 'The Problem.' Nothing's *wrong*. Second of all, the palmist wasn't a 'she.' He was a 'he.' His name is Steve." And that had been the wrong thing to say.

Will said, "Okay, let me get this straight. You spend a hundred bucks on a piece of rock. Then you give *Steve* some more money. Then he feels up your hand. Am I getting this right? That's great, Sara. Just great. Just send me a video, next time you get fucked."

"It wasn't like that," Sara said. Because it hadn't been. But Will didn't hear her. He'd hung up.

That was two days ago. Will doesn't remember the conversation. Sara knows that he doesn't, because Will is a gentleman. He's a gentleman, and gentlemen don't hang up. Hanging up is just rude. When a man insults a lady? He apologizes. Then sends flowers.

Now it's Sunday. There have been no flowers. Sara flips the cleaver back and forth in her hand. The blade edge flaps like a slow swinging door. They registered for it. Had wanted it. Had been gifted it. Yet never, in the four years of their marriage, had Sara used it. Maybe it's all her fault. The chef's knife, the bread knife, the paring knife—these she uses, knows when to sharpen, knows when to employ. The serrated knife for tomatoes, slicing without squashing; the broad side of the chef's knife slammed down on some garlic cloves, crushing them. But not the cleaver. The cleaver Sara found, late last night, looking for something else that she'd lost. She found the cleaver in the back of a drawer. She laughed, and placed it on the countertop. June and Ward Cleaver, they were, Sara thought. June and Ward Cleaver, and one beaver to share. In their bed,

she used her vibrator. She doesn't know whether she passed out with it on, or if she rolled over on it, turned it on in the night. She knows she woke up at four a.m. to feel it buzzing on her face. And she knows that she hasn't slept since.

Now it's morning. Sara flips the blade back and forth, a nervous habit. Through the window, the sun is coming up. It's game day in Baltimore. Raven Nation is stirring. That's what her husband would say, standing behind her, his arms around her slim waist. He'd borrow her coffee cup, sip from it, make it his own. They'd look out the window, watch Saturday's cigarette butts get swept by a broom. Sara stands at the sink, at the window in the back of the house. It's still early, by Sunday standards, for this Baltimore neighborhood of bars and young people and Sunday brunches instead of church. "Raven Nation is stirring," Will would say. He'd throw his head back, release a boisterous frat-boy "CA-CAW!" She would laugh and then, laughing, say, "Stop it!" Or he'd play a drum roll on her hipbones; call out the starting lineup in his low announcer's voice. Or he might, depending on the morning, on the mood, on the strength of his hangover and their plans for the day, choose to whisper. He knows she's a sucker for his breath in her ear. "Raven Nation is stirring," he'd say, pulling her tight, his dick pressing hard on the small of her back.

Sara flips the blade, watches her coffee cool on the countertop. She taps the dull edge against her palm and then lays the blade down on the counter. She'll clean the guest bathroom. She'll vacuum. She'll make food, lots of food. It's been months since she fried something, months since she's eaten something fried. The fine oily mist tossed up from the pot will take ages to clean in the morning. But that's okay. That's tomorrow. And having tomorrow's job lined up today is good, too. Behind her, Sara knows, the sun

is coming up. The sun is positive energy. The season has taken a turn for the worse. But there's a chance, still an outside chance, that the Ravens could—maybe—make the playoffs. And then? Then, the Superbowl. Disney, with the kids. Eternal glory, and so on. Sara has decided she'll make the chicken wings herself. Everyone likes chicken wings, and everyone knows Sara's chicken is the best. Breast, thigh, it doesn't matter. She'll make the chicken wings and everyone will come. Will will eat the chicken wings, and Will will drink the beer, and Will will even, Sara thinks, toast the chef.

Sara will wear her Mardi Gras beads. She's got it all planned, and she's got the whole day. Today is the day, Sara thinks, for her husband to come home for good. To come home, to come, to come inside her. Then everything will change. She drains her coffee, sets her cup in the clean sink. She walks through the kitchen, through the living room, into her shoes. She opens the front door, stiffens a little on the step, and then steps out and into the narrow street.

Four blocks away, Sara's Saab is parallel-parked, badly. When she starts the car, the radio's loud noise hits her face like a slap. She was angry last night, drunk, leaving Will another voicemail. A friend of his had parked his Jeep in their driveway—knowing Sara would recognize the stickers, that she wouldn't have him towed. Knowing, too, Sara thinks, that she'd never go and find them. Wouldn't know if she should look at Ropewalk, first, or at Mother's, or Pub Dog, or Mad River, or Grumpie's, or MaGerk's. She'd driven with the windows down and the volume up, trying to regain the lost mood of her girls' night revelry. They'd been quite a crowd. Had attracted quite a crowd. Sara circled the block in ever-widening circuits, missed out on three different spots spied the

wrong way down skinny one-way streets. She cursed and smiled brightly, waving to friends and acquaintances as she drove her Saab past. Sara and her husband are fixtures in the neighborhood. It seems they know everyone. And everyone, last night, had been out. Sara had sung along with her stereo, hoping to catch a cold that would last until Christmas. That would show them. If she caught a cold—if she caught pneumonia—would she even try to treat it? Last night, as she walked home, walked home to discover her driveway now empty—the boys had moved on, to Fells Point, maybe, or some girl's house, or were dead in a ditch somewhere, for all Sara knew—she thought about pneumonia, and she wondered.

Today, Sara's anger is filed away, the cold, congealed leftovers of an unpleasant meal. Today, there are other tasks. It's chilly; the sky looks like an old sock; it might snow. As she drives, Sara listens to voices of people she'll never know. People singing country songs. Songs of love and heartache. Sweet sixteens and field parties. Of whiskey, and moonshine, and tequila, and beer. She makes a note on a scrap piece of paper in her purse, writing down some lyrics so she can ask her phone, later, who sings them. She needs that new app, the one that pulls song names out of the air. Sara peeks at the drivers of the other cars, their fast food on their laps, their dogs at the window; the mother, in the van, serene, driving her three sleeping kids; the kids leaning against pillows, the pillows pressed against windows—starting out on a road trip, or maybe already on their way home, almost there. The mother's lips move to a song Sara can't hear. A man in a yellow Napa Auto Parts truck pulls up next to Sara. A handsome man in overalls and a baseball cap. Sara is sure he's listening to the same radio station she is; his head bobs to the same rhythm as her foot. He looks at her, once, and doesn't look

again. It's early December. Everyone's windows are up. They don't connect. But she knows, from his truck, exactly where she can find him. Sara likes a man with a truck. And men in their trucks like Sara, too—or they used to. She thinks they could again, if she gave them half a chance. Sara pulls her hair out from her bun and she shakes it.

Thank goodness, Sara thinks, for the industrious nail salon and these wonderful, raven-haired ladies. Sara picks out her purple, listens as the women—the nail technicians, the eyebrow waxers—chatter amongst themselves. Their words bubble in her ears, a foreign language. Sara slips her feet into the tub beneath her chair. It starts to froth. Sara knows what they're saying, reads their gestures, hears one woman's tired, blissed-out tone. She sees the hair, tied back hastily; the man's shirt, knotted at the waist; the too-fancy shoes. The other women are scolding her. Sara knows this look, knows the script. The subject matter, Sunday or not, never changes. They're talking about a man. Sara's chair begins massaging her back.

As her feet simmer in their Stimulating Peppermint Bath, Sara pulls out her phone, writes and sends an invite. As her old polish is wiped away, she reads *In Touch*. She reads about Angie and Brad and *Adoption Again?* She reads about Catherine, the Duchess of Cambridge; on one cover, *Trouble in the Royal Wedding Bed*; on the next, *A Royal Baby*. She reads about Jen, and Kim, and Real Housewives, and Teen Moms. As Sara catches up—as she's soothed by the cellulite, the seductions, the botched plastic surgeries, as she's touched by the stories, as she's angered—Sara's toenails are shaped. Her cuticles pushed back, her dead skin sloughed off. She checks her Facebook, sees her invitation's been accepted—one, three, eight people are now coming to her party. Sara's

toenails are painted quickly, efficiently, by a woman who never looks up, never speaks. Not wearing a ring. Sara leaves a generous tip.

As her toenails dry, warm beneath the heat lamp, her phone rings. Sara speaks to her husband. Yes, she says. She thought it might be fun to have some friends over for the game. Yes, she knows it's last minute. Yes, sorry, she's at the salon and she can't quite hear him. His friends will be there at eight. So she'll see him soon? He'll be there? Good. Sara sits, makes a grocery list, wishes the salon door would stop opening. It's cold outside. Sara makes her list and waits for her nail polish to cure.

At the grocery store, helium-filled footballs bop and snap in the wind. Inside, other balloons float silently, motionless, like strange purple seaweed in the sky. Sara glides along in her flimsy salon flip-flops. She picks up some guacamole; picks up another kind of guacamole. Sara puts them both in her cart. Two small children in their Sunday best are skipping through the condiments aisle; they innocently affirm God's existence in some people's lives. There are already poinsettias. Santa is everywhere. There are large purple and gold sheet cakes for sale in the bakery, and numbered football jersey cookies, and trays of sliced veggies and cold cuts and cheeses. There are holes on certain shelves: in the salsas, in the sodas. There are no Tums available. Stomachs will hurt, and that hurt will have to be endured.

Sara rolls to the fringe of the store, to the meats. Her husband is coming. Her brother is coming. Her brother is bringing his wife. If they get drunk, all three can sleep over. Empty beds for everyone! Husband, brother, sister-in-law. Sara. Two of her girlfriends, the single ones. Three of her husband's unmarried friends. Two of them in

real estate, the other living at his mom's, taking some time off to "think about things." Driving a snowplow while he thinks, Mark is, on-call every day, making good money, he claims. Though how he could—it hasn't snowed yet—is a mystery to Sara and even to Will. Her girls should go for the other guys—as her girls well know, and as Sara will remind them. Nine people altogether, and they've all met before. 15 wings per person. 15 times nine is 135. 135 wings. She loads four packages of 30 wings into her cart. 120 wings. There is one package left. She grabs that one, too, throws it on top of the others. 150 wings. They'd have too many. Better to have too many than to find you have too few. They'll have twice-baked potatoes and chili. Spicy. Carbs. She grabs hot sauce, chips, pretzels, honey mustard, some brownie mix. Will the wings be hot enough? Will they be too hot? Brownies from a mix are just fine, Sara tells herself. They're just for the weed and that's special enough.

Sara will make pot brownies, for a change, for a special surprise. She'll grind the weed, sauté it in oil, then strain it. She looked up a recipe while she sat in the salon. It didn't look hard. She'd seen it done several times when they were in college. A mid-afternoon snack, one of their more mild diversions. Her husband loves her more, it seems, when he's high. And the sex is better, seems better, though who can tell if it *is* better—they're both high—but *something's* better, maybe Sara's better, maybe Sara's less uptight. Less worried about whether her vagina's wet enough, or her mouth too dry, or if his sperm is strong. Or if she's ovulating, or menstruating, or just lying there. If she's just passing time, if she's just waiting for him to finish. If she's communicating, or complicating. If he's just masturbating. If—it happens a lot—he's deflating. Or maybe, she'll wonder, even procreating. She overthinks things. Sara knows this. "You need to

loosen up," Will says to Sara, their therapist says, her mother says. "Warm the crystal," the palmist said. "And the crystal will warm you." Sara reaches for the rose quartz pendent, tucks it under her sweater. She's absorbing its positive natural energy. Sara is confident that she can follow any recipe, even if drugs are involved. She rubs her arms, her arms feeling cold; her whole body feeling cold, standing in her flip-flops in the dairy section. Sara rolls on. Grabs some lube. Picks out dishwasher detergent and toilet paper and napkins. Milk, OJ. And a package of meringues from one of those waist-high impulse baskets on the way to the register. Why not? They've been dyed purple. Purple meringues. People everywhere are wearing their jerseys. Her cashier, Duncan, asks for her Club Card. She gives him her phone number without the old number-giving thrill. Sara wonders if she might be going grey. Her items roll down the conveyor belt. She saves two dollars and seventeen cents with her Club Card. The meringues were on sale; otherwise, she might not have bought them.

The beer store is harder, a man's world, somehow; though there are lots of women here, so that can't quite be right. She reaches into case after case, shivering, fretting, minutes spreading like mold. Something local, something classic, something dark, something light. Something for the beer nerd. Some Bud, because they say it might snow. Snow means work for Mark. Mark might have to plow. Mark, who brings his video games into her house and eats her food and drinks her drink, and has never gotten over his crush on her, his high school crush, his wet-dream obsession. Which is annoying, his persistence, his feelings for her. That doesn't mean, though, that she wants him to drive drunk. How many times has she heard Mark say: There's just something

about Bud. I can drink it, and drink it, and drink it. Bud's in my blood. How many times has Sara had to be assured: Mark's fine. So he's had a few Buds. Give him the goddamn keys, or I'll never hear the end of it. So Bud it is, in case Mark has to plow; and the blood, if there is blood, will be on someone else's hands, not on hers.

She does picture his funeral, though. She thinks about the summers when Mark had been *her* friend, not Will's. How they always went tubing down the Gunpowder Falls, which aren't so much falls, where they went, but were more like a river. How, back in high school, Mark had been the beer guy, how he'd bring an extra tube to float his cooler in. How he told her, one time, about noodling. Noodling: catching catfish by sticking your bare arm into a known catfish hole; letting the catfish bite down, grab hold of your arm; hooking the catfish by the gills, pulling it out, gutting it, scaling it, frying it, eating it. Noodling. You have to have someone on the other end of the rope, Mark had said. Sometimes, he said, you're twenty feet under. Sometimes in the holes, there are snapping turtles instead of fish. You need someone on the boat to haul you out if you're in trouble. Someone to help you eat all the goddamn fish. "Catfish are big fuckers." Even back then, Sara was known as the cook. Noodling is a two-man sport, Mark said. Two men or two women. One man, one woman. Whatever. Noodling pairs stick together for life. "Like lobsters," Sara said. And Mark said, "Exactly." Mark taught her to shoot her first gun, that summer. Sara grabs the Bud, a whole case of it. She puts some other beers, other drinks in her cart. And the weed—this is why she's stressed.

Sara still needs to get the weed from that guy. Wally. The wine guy. Wally, with the long hair. Wally, who she'd already sought out, hunting through the store, her underarms sweating. *Are you Wally?* She used her husband's name, chatted him up,

asked if business was busier on game days. She untucked the pendant, asked him, "Hey, by the way—what kind of conditioner do you use on your hair? Really? Just mayonnaise?" Wally, the wine guy, whose hair had that shine. Was she flirting? She was flirting. The rose quartz was working.

Wally will meet her outside. Sara will buy the weed. She has the cash. She has no idea how much cash she should have. Wally might rip her off. Sara will never know. She'll buy the weed, she'll make the brownies. She's buying more beer than they could possibly drink in one night. She'll put some in the fridge, and some in the basement. Well-prepared. But not overeager. She tries never to be eager. Sometimes, though, eager is a dress she doesn't notice that she's wearing—until she spills something on it, or someone spills something on her.

Sara brings the groceries in. As she opens the fridge, she wonders about men. She wonders where her husband is staying. If he has laundry in his building. If he's rewearing underwear, if he's rewearing socks. These're three-days, he used to say, back when she and Will started dating. As in, Will would take his shoes off, and his foot stench would fill the room. Sara would grimace, and he'd explain. It's not me, he'd say. It's the socks. These're three-days. Socks worn for three days. As if that explains it. As if that excuses it, some misplaced pride in his infrequent economy. She wonders if, in his absence, he's reverted to old ways. She sees the debit every month: seven hundred dollars. He can't get much for that, even in Baltimore. Not in any respectable neighborhood, not unless he has a roommate. Maybe he does have a roommate. Who knows? Sara unpacks the groceries and tries to imagine herself as a man. Double her

weight. Taller. Untouchable toes. Maybe that's why Will never ate the snacks. She keeps healthy snacks in the produce drawer. Maybe he couldn't reach them. Sara crouches to the carrot level. Maybe she needs to reorganize the fridge. Maybe she needs to clean the fridge, then reorganize it. Maybe she isn't doing very well imagining herself as a man. Sara widens her squat, tries to place a penis between her legs. She scratches the air where her balls would hang. She gestures, a sort of jerk-off and explode gesture, a thing she's seen men do. A thing she doesn't understand or find remotely appealing. What do they eat, she wonders, out there on their own? Sara has seen those fridges, sparse and puddled. She saw them in college and she saw them in her brief stint in New York. Sara made a carrot cake for a boyfriend's birthday once. In the sorority oven. Grating the carrots by hand. A tiny grater, and she grated a few of her knuckles in, too. They'd eaten half the cake that night, drunk and in bed. Then she'd watched it grow hard and crusty for months, the carefully piped icing spelling a reproach every time she opened his refrigerator door. Why had she always opened the door? There'd never been anything inside. And how embarrassed she'd been to look at his roommates, knowing they knew that she'd made him this cake. This cake that was sitting in their fridge, long gone stale. One night she opened up the fridge and she said, simply, "Hey, do you think I could get my plate back?" "Oh, right," he said. *Oh right*. That asshole. He picked up the plate, peeled back the plastic wrap. Walked over to the garbage can, and slid the cake in. Some of the icing had to be chipped before it would slide but, fairly quickly, the cake was in the garbage. And then he was washing the plate, and then he was handing it to her, and there were still smears of icing on it, and she wrapped it in a plastic bag and set it in her purse and they'd watched a movie together. Because, really, the cake had been a

gift and his to do with whatever he wanted. That was the first boy Sara thought that she'd marry.

On the door of the fridge are the wedding invitations. Not long ago, there'd been a flurry of weddings. Summer weddings, winter weddings, weddings all-year-round. Now they have one Save the Date and three birth notices. Will's cousin's kid is an ugly baby: cross-eyed, troubled skin, wearing green. Looks like an olive. Poor girl, Sara thinks. And the Christmas newsletters are already slipping through the door. She'll have to write hers soon, Sara thinks. Or just sign cards. She'll send a lovely, simple card this year. Maybe something from the MoMA store. They can afford MoMA cards, even with Will's rent. What Sara can't afford, she thinks, is to write about her life in a newsletter. Sara shakes out some Advil and opens the fridge again, reaches for the Brita. She looks at the shrink-wrapped chicken parts. 150 wings. Jesus, why had she thought they would need so many? But better, she reminds herself, to have too many than to find you have too few. That is her philosophy. Enough shoes to choose from. No shoe emergencies. Better to have a few too many drinks, rather than be sober. To have too much sex, instead of too little. Too many kids, instead of none at all. She looks at the hideous baby on the door of the freezer. She looks down at the Styrofoam carton of eggs. And Sara sighs.

Sara goes for a run. She runs and runs, her long legs trim in their Spandex, her thick blonde ponytail whipping her forward. Sara is gorgeous. She runs the crowded routes. She runs fast because she runs every day. She's in shape. She is seen. Sara runs fast, runs, and runs, listening to happy music until she thinks about nothing.

* * *

Sara throws her apron on overtop of her running clothes. She wears the green one now, so she can wear the orange one later. The Ravens are playing the Cincinnati Bengals. She'll wear the orange one when Will comes home because she knows he'll say, if he says anything at all, "Orange? Jesus, Sara. When we're playing the *Bengals*?" Maybe he'll try to untie it and she'll swat him away with a spoon and he'll say something along the lines of how he'll have to take it off later, then. Sara smiles to herself as she ties on the green one. While the potatoes are cooking, she cooks the weed, strains the oil. When the potatoes are cooked, she mixes the brownie mix, bakes the brownies. She slices the baked potatoes in half, disembowels them, mixes their insides with cheese and milk and sour cream and cayenne pepper. She refills the skins and arranges them in a baking dish. She caramelizes the shallots and arranges them on top. She makes the chili. She cuts corners. She uses canned beans. Making the chili is easy, just a matter of chopping and measuring and combining. She likes to chop. The chili bubbles in its pot. She slices the brownies and arranges them on a tray. Sara mixes blue cheese with buttermilk, mayonnaise, sour cream, white wine vinegar. She slices celery sticks, makes the wing sauce. Frank's Louisiana Hot Sauce, Tabasco, butter, brown sugar, vinegar. Sara rinses the wings and sharpens her cleaver; she doesn't need to; it's already sharp. She separates each wing into pieces: drumsticks, two-bones, and wing-tips. First you have to pop the joints. They make a wet, cartilaginous noise. Then you cut them where you've popped them. Sara slams cleaver down. The work is slippery, and satisfying. She has huge piles of the three different pieces of chicken wing. She's having fun, getting things done. This is her Zen state. The palmist had known this. Steve had seen it

in her capable hands, perhaps spotted some food remnant stuck beneath a nail. "You are happiest," he said, "serving others." Sara never paints her fingernails. It's not practical if you cook like she does—every meal on every day. And cooking's how she gets them. Her kitchen smells better than her nails could ever look. She isn't worried. Will is coming home. Their friends are coming over. Sara's chicken is the best. She cuts each and every wing. Saves the wing tips for stock. She hadn't factored the splitting of them into her math. She now has 300 wings. How many people are coming again? Sara laughs. She prepares the dredging mixture. Cayenne pepper, black pepper, table salt, cornstarch. She pours chips in a bowl, scoops guacamole into a bowl, empties salsa in a bowl. She puts pretzels in a bowl, puts mustard in a smaller bowl. She wraps a plastic wrap shroud over each and every one. She sets them out on the credenza, under the huge blank obsidian screen. Will won't like it if people block the screen. She moves the bowls to the coffee table. She does the dishes, hangs up her apron. Sara eats a brownie, and she strips.

The sun goes down, and the neighborhood is starting to get louder. Sara leans against the sink, drinking a large glass of water. The Elavil makes her eternally thirsty. The kitchen, for now, is cold and dry and crisp. The surfaces in Sara's kitchen are clear. The chili's on the stove. The wings are in the fridge. The beer is cold. The peanut oil is ready to boil. The coffee pot is lined up with the edge of the counter, with the window, with the silverware in the drawers. The little forks and full-size forks, and the knives, and the spoons and little spoons are lined up in their dividers like five metal fingers in a glove. The white, waffled towel hangs from the handle of the oven, centered above the

black-ringed rubber mat on the floor. The floor and walls and roof and windows all more or less meet at right angles—as much as they can, anyway, for an old rowhouse in Baltimore. They were gifted this home by Will's parents. A wedding present, a project that would bring them even closer together, or so they'd been told. Will wanted to fix it up fast. We'll save time by spending money, he said. Sara had wanted to fix it up slow, make it hers. It hadn't been about saving money, though they had saved money by spending the time. Sara loves her long drives to Home Depot, loves speeding north, way up 83. Loves the big orange carts, loves the power tools. She loves doing things herself. She started with the loose knob, with the wobbly chair, with the string for the bulb in the pantry that is now a clean cord with a smooth little pull on the end. She started there, and her projects grew bigger. Well, it's fixed up now, and extremely saleable, if it comes down to that. If Sara stands here long enough—she's done it before—she'll see the last of the light, the large parallelograms sliding across the floor, the floor she refinished, now lit up and golden. The diamonds will slide and grow slimmer, the angles more acute, more obtuse, until the shapes of light become thin lines, until they disappear altogether. Sara's slippered feet stand in front of the sink, beneath her shiny, stretchy legs, legs in black leggings that look almost like football pants, the black leggings filled out in all the right places. Her legs stand underneath her narrow hips and sweatshirted breasts, the sweatshirt printed with a black, red-eyed bird. Her eyes look out the window, over their small yard and the not-quite-yet-gentrified alley. She looks at her neighbor's house, boarded up in the back. Where one night a stained, discarded couch had gone up in flames—the fire started, it seems, by nobody in particular. The fire spreading, as Sara watched, to the second floor deck, to the bedroom balcony, and to the next-door

neighbor's rooftop deck, too. She watched it, alone, from her own rooftop perch. The wind blew the smoke away, off to the west, and she sat where she and Will used to play their favorite Baltimore game, their drinking game at dusk: Count the Rats. She watched the fire spread, alone, watched the firemen with their hoses, turning her head if she got bored, to look north. Just a few blocks away, she could see her friends drinking. It was three in the morning and they were lounging there, laughing, spilling beer on the spot on the roof where she and Will had once had sex—some night after college, the wind in her hair, the wind tangling her beads. Before they'd ever lived here, before they'd married. Some night after a football game, some big win. Sara watched her friends on their deck and watched her neighbor's house burn. She saw not one, but *three* fat rats scurry out from the house, fur aflame, screaming. Sara looks out from her kitchen window, over her small yard and the frosty dead grass and the skeletal bones of the cushionless outdoor furniture. Furniture that had never, at the end of the summer, been folded up and stored away. She turns her glass of water in her hands. Leaves have frozen where they gathered at the feet of the two lounge chairs; leaves in brown and red, like piles of flesh fallen from the frame. They have one tree, an oak, split by the fence in the rear left corner of their small urban yard. The oak lost its leaves, last fall, in a manner swift and shocking. Leaves sit on the grill, like a wig on a gorilla. And on the flowerpots, and against the gate, and along the windowsill. The yard is a mess. But men don't notice these things, Sara thinks. Clean or dirty. It hardly matters. None of it matters. Here, take these wings. Do they smell? Yeah, they're three-days. Go ahead, eat. See the little holes where the feathers used to be? Gone. I pulled the feathers out, fried the chicken, sauced it, all for you.

Fuck. Sara's tired.

Sara reminds herself that she's not at all tired. She's ready. Well-rested, always well-rested. She hasn't worked for four years, and she's not at all tired, not physically. Neither are the birds. Sara looks out over the kitchen sink, out the window. Watching as the birds swirl and stroke the air in the twilight. Riding easily above their nests, floating on currents she has never figured out how to tap.

"Just relax," Will said. "Just relax."

And Sara said, "But *how*? How can I relax," she yelled, "when we're trying to procreate?"

"Jesus," Will said, his legs swinging to the floor. "Don't be such a try-hard."

"I wouldn't have to try so hard," Sara said, "if you were just a little harder." She reached around, flipped his limp dick with her finger.

"Jesus," Will said again, reaching for his pants. She struck a pose on the bed, started pouting. He looked at her. She crossed and recrossed her feet. "You're hotter than ever, Sara," Will said, standing up. Turning around, zipping up his pants. He kissed her toenails. She flipped her hair. "But I don't think I can fuck you." He pulled on a shirt. "I don't think I can fuck you, anymore." Sara giggled, and Will tossed his hands in the air. "There it is," he said. "There it is. Jesus, Sara, get help. Call when you're a little less crazy, okay?"

"Go away," she said. Go away, she told him.

Sara leans against the kitchen counter, looks out the window at the charred and frosty mess. She touches her pendant. It doesn't match her outfit. Reach into the hole, she should have said. I know it looks dark. There's something there, though. Maybe

Will doesn't know about noodling. She'll teach him, Sara thinks. The palmist had told her that. "Everything we touch, it goes right through our palms," Steve said. "You have the hands of a teacher, of a giver. Keep something," he said, "for yourself." He sold her the rose quartz pendant and a large chunk of zincite. "Shoes," Steve said, "are a natural source of energy. You want foundation. You want roots. If you make roots, you'll make branches. If you make branches, the bird will build. You are surrounded by manipulative people, people in your circle of trust. Remove your blockage," Steve said, "by no later than the end of January. Have you been seeing an animal with you?"

"Yes," Sara said.

"Everything," Steve said, "will be decided very soon."

In the living room, the early game is wrapping up. The Steelers are losing; they're about to lose; they have lost. The bobbleheads bob. The peanut oil is hot. Sara's husband's Range Rover passes by the window. But he doesn't turn his head. Parking in their neighborhood on Game Day is a nightmare. Her living room is filled with her family, with their friends. She hopes he makes it home before kickoff. On the television, they're announcing the teams. She can hear the stadium from here, can almost feel it where she stands. Raven Nation is ready. Raven Nation is hungry. The doorknob spins. The hardwood floor is striped with the distance between them. Sara drops her first batch of wings in the fryer. The oil hisses and spits, filling her ears with its roar. She turns away from the door, looks through to the living room. She sees Mark in front of her, feels her husband's eyes scanning her back. Sara feels the cold wind on her ankles. She spins around, smiling brightly, fanning out her sex. She sprays pheromones, swiveling,

her hair swirling out. Sara's beads bounce. Her orange apron is tied tight around her waist. Her toenails shine like ten smooth purple shells. Noise fills the city. The players line up.

In Cincinnati, too, there's a woman dressed like Sara; but that woman wears orange, a purple apron tied on top. Her hands, too, are palm up. They're supporting a tray. There are small pigs, in small blankets. There are toothpicks, for dainty eating. In Cincinnati, in the kitchen, the dishes pile higher. She used a different recipe—but Cincinnati's wings will still be hot. Both women were raised as winners. Only one team will win.

Traffic, in Cincinnati, is light today.

Traffic on Sara's blog is way up.

The women turn to their husbands. Their husbands' mouths fall open.

Who paid more for their zincite?

Who has the largest crystal?

The kick is made, the ball is caught. All across America, our hearts are in our throats. Chests swell. Cells cleave. The cleaver's in her hand. We scream.

And on the screen—on all the screens—the little people move, everyone starting to run.

Chris, John,

Thank you so much for making it through all these pages, and for all of the guidance and mentorship and wisdom. These two years have been amazing, and I feel so privileged to have shared them with both of you.

(Sorry about all the swears.)

Can't wait for your input,

Alison