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The University of Southern Mississippi

LOOKER: STORIES

by

George Robert Hargett

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate School  
of The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved:

Mr. Andrew Milward  
Committee Chair

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May 2015

ABSTRACT

LOOKER: STORIES

by George Robert Hargett

May 2015

The following stories, completed by the author between August 2013 and February 2015, deal with love, obscurity, isolation, failure, vulnerability and insecurity, looking and losing, the fears tied up in all these, and, once in a while, gaining.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

In college I minored in journalism because I had my doubts about making a career of writing fiction. I finished up coursework not really knowing what I would do next. I applied for creative writing graduate programs as well as writing jobs of all kinds. I bought a cheap suit. I interviewed with newspapers and ad agencies and tech writing companies over Skype. Nothing panned out. I expanded my options, applied for library positions, bookstore positions, florist delivery positions—how nice it would be, I thought, to drive around and brighten everyone’s day. Again, nothing panned out.

Summer came, and I called the Marriott in downtown Memphis and applied to be a valet, went through the whole process, which consisted of filling out forms and picking a uniform size. They gave me the uniform, and a few days before I was supposed to start, the editor from a small community newspaper on the other side of the state called me. He asked if I could interview in person soon, and I told him I’d be there the next day. “That’s great,” he said. “But before you drive all the way out here, you should know: this is not Shangri-La.”

Sevier County, Tennessee, is not Shangri-La. It’s not Chattanooga, either, but I was writing—for a living. A very modest living, yes, but I knew that going in, and what’s more, journalism seemed to be free of all the doubts I associated with creative writing. I didn’t have to worry about whether I was any good or what people would think of the stories. Only the facts mattered; if you were doing your job, the bylines were interchangeable.

I enjoyed it for a while, spent a lot of time in the Smokies, made friends with the park rangers, met a lot of people who made crafts. I covered tourism in Pigeon Forge and

Gatlinburg, photographed Dolly Parton on several occasions, brushed shoulders with her once, got called “sweetie.” But you always had to take twelve times as many photos of Dolly as you normally would, because invariably there was some flaw, a half-closed eye or a drooping lip, and a massive effort was undertaken to make her look perfect.

I covered government and education in Sevierville, attended countless Public Building Authority meetings and Education Committee meetings, wrote articles about sewage treatment upgrades and middle school science fairs. I live-Tweeted the voting for liquor-by-the-drink in Pigeon Forge, which failed to pass, then did it again after a voter registration bungle, and this time it passed.

I fell into a routine. I figured out what questions the schools superintendent would answer, which officials would pick up the phone and which wouldn’t, the protocol for deciding what local businesses to call for a quote in a specialized article—see who buys ad space in the paper. After a while every story started to feel the same. I was cranking out a minimum of two articles a day, and this kind of intensive writing drained me for the rest of the day; I found it much harder to write fiction during this year at the newspaper than any other time in my life.

The failing community newspaper became a tedious grind, had lost its luster. I began experimenting with style in the news articles, took advantage of opportunities to write opinion pieces. And though the hours were good and the mountains were pretty, I longed to go back to academia, to fiction workshops. I got a library card. I checked out *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* and Flannery O’Connor’s *Complete Stories*. The two women behind the desk looked at me. “Serious stuff here,” one said. “Oh, yes,” said the other, “he works for the newspaper.”

But even after I was accepted into a few graduate programs and decided to come to the Center for Writers, I still felt that I had only vaguely committed to something, that all this story-writing stuff could easily fall through, and in five years I would be leading a much different life. Back in the media business, maybe. It's true that I still didn't consider myself a writer (outside of the newspaper industry, that is, but even there, my business cards said *staff writer*), but really I think I was guarding myself from what I feared, and I feared then what I still fear as a writer today—failure, and that I will be exposed as an uninteresting person, that what I put on paper really, in fact, does not matter. To fail at writing stories, as I see it, means to fail at affecting anyone with what affects you.

It is not a simple thing to *want* to be a writer growing up in America, or, my guess is, anywhere else. A lot of factors are stacked against a life of creative pursuits. All this depends on the individual and the individual's situation, of course; some will have an easier go of it than others. It helps to be stubborn, or at least naïve in the beginning, and to have a little cash and loving support from wherever you can find it, but all that will only do so much. Nothing could ever get me past that itching feeling that none of this was real, that I was just kidding myself.

I am not fearless, and never have been. I wrote stories when I was a child because I enjoyed writing and believed I was good at it. The recognition came from my classmates. They loved my absurd narratives, and I loved their responses when I read the stories aloud. But as I got older, and attempting to be a writer became a real possibility, I doubted whether I actually had any experiences worth writing about, and consequently I doubted myself as a candidate for authorship. I have never had what Roland Barthes, in



*The Preparation of the Novel*, calls the “writer’s pride”—“I write, therefore I’m worth something, absolutely, whatever happens” (161). My writing is now tied up with my identity, I admit, I just can’t help but think about the potential reader’s perspective, and maybe that’s why writing makes me so anxious. What is a writer worth nowadays? How does a writer reconcile the desire to create art (or, more modestly, to tell a story) with the mainstream culture’s general indifference to art or artful storytelling? Forget the mainstream culture? Write for a small circle of other writers and readers of literary fiction? And then, and perhaps most frighteningly, how does one obtain a sense of worth in that small circle? I wonder, too, if asking these questions means I am already doomed, concerned with the wrong aspects of art-making. All I know is I have this desire to write stories that has been tempered by pervasive anxieties about writing. This has led me to self-doubt, mental paralysis, secrecy, compartmentalization, journalism.

How other writers grapple with these anxieties, or whether other writers feel them to the extent I do, I don’t know. What seems to have enabled me to keep writing is, strangely, a family tragedy, the kind of event that puts a stop to your world and subsequently filters how you will go on viewing it. For me, it was the death of my sister when I was fourteen. Death and loss do odd things to the people they affect. The experience is brimming with contradictions, paradoxes, binaries. Like Chloe in “Don’t Tell Me,” you may feel “smaller but also somehow bigger, out of proportion with the rest of the world.” Both inside of yourself and outside, looking in. You may feel at once that nothing matters, and still this new proximity to mortality frees you up to do what otherwise you may have been too afraid to do, afraid for whatever reason—because

people say it isn't worth anything, or because deep down you know you may try to affect someone and they will not be affected.

For a long time I could not write about my sister's death, yet, as a high school student with hardly any noteworthy experiences, it was the only thing I considered worth writing about. I finally attempted it in a college fiction workshop. I wrote an experimental story that touched on my own anxieties about fiction writing, with one death at the center and another, paralleling my sister's, on the periphery. I'd been reading Barthes and Schopenhauer and a lot of postmodern fiction. I had ideas, and I liked what I'd written. My professor asked me to stay behind after it was workshopped. He said, essentially, that the story was impressive but why didn't I just tell it straight? I was stubborn then, but I see his point. I was being playful, layering on all this metafiction, dancing around what I was trying to say. The characters were names on the page. The voice was stilted, heightened, academic. I was taking the reader out of the experience, calling too much attention to the byline. Since then I have tried to tell stories straight, emphasize clarity over obscurity, and, to paraphrase another professor, cut out the writing that looks like writing.

I often hear people—and I mean people whom I'm inclined to believe, people who have been doing this a long time—say that “everyone has a story to tell,” and this is sometimes taken as justification for the idea that anyone can be a writer, or that, if you're writing now, you should keep doing it. Sure, writers come from everywhere, and sure, we want to believe everyone is unique and in that sense, everyone has a story to tell. But how are you going to tell it? Writing about death or loss or love is not enough, not by a long shot, because the minute you start to write about one of these big themes, it loses its

potency. Instead—and this is what I and many other young writers learned the hard way—you write about people, people experiencing the emotions tied up in the big themes. The best way for the writer to take himself out of the story is to put more work into the characters, let them provide the link to the reader. It’s better to start small, imply more, and get at the elements indirectly if you ever want a chance to make a reader feel the way the real thing feels.

Like many writers, I often start with an image or line of dialogue and let the story grow around it. I try to emphasize character and conflict over other elements because I believe the success of these will often determine the level of reader engagement in a story, but in the course of writing any story, inevitably I find that I’m deeply interested in narrative movement and structure, and how these relate to the reader’s response to any given part of a story. For example, in “Gainer,” which is chronological but shifts perspectives among several characters, Wallace’s point of view section is the penultimate section of the story. Till that point, he’s been characterized as a creepy pool manager who wears a kimono and takes advantage of Liz, one of the young lifeguards. His point of view section, I hope, complicates that reading of him, but its placement seems to matter to me because it presents a somewhat dramatic shift, in setting and somewhat in tone, from the previous sections. I wanted this shift to be pleasantly surprising to the reader, who has been experiencing the story through the eyes of two primary characters and one secondary character. In my mind, this delight would further complicate the reader’s perception of Wallace, deepen engagement with the story, and propel the narrative into the final section. I don’t know whether this works for the reader or even if this is the correct move to make, but I try to write under the simple premise David Madden and

Virgil Scott outline in *Studies in the Short Story*: “All elements in fiction are closely related and constantly interact with and influence each other” (6). In the above example, structure, character, and conflict interact and influence each other, and, I hope, elicit a more complex response in the reader.

And thematically, though many of these stories deal with loss, often it’s not a physical loss, but the loss of some state of being. Because even when a physical thing is lost—a sister or child, for example—another, unseen thing goes with her, which is simply who you once were, your old life, your joys and sadnesses, whatever they may have been, before she was gone. In this way, my intention with these stories is that theme remain bound in character.

While loss is a part of all these stories to some degree, I didn’t want the characters to feel like passive victims who were only concerned with this loss. Charles Baxter discusses these types of characters in his essay, “Dysfunctional Narratives, or: ‘Mistakes Were Made,’” explaining that they “are not acting upon events in present narrative time but are reacting obscurely to harms done to them in the psychic past, from unthinkable impulses that will go on forever unexplained” (71). I tried instead to clarify character motivation early on and focus on character and conflict development throughout. In “Gainer,” it’s true that tragedy strikes Kyle, but his own ego is what led him to the diving board in the rain. Liz sleeps with her boss, Wallace, an older man, after she feels threatened by him, but her arrogance got her into the situation and, subsequently, she tries to take control of it by making the first move. The story is in many ways a coming-of-age tale; it has to do with maturity and the loss of innocence, which Audrey, perhaps the main-main character, seems to want to resist up to the very end. In “Human Interest,” the

narrator is estranged from his wife and is in prison; he has lost complete control over his life, but he tries to gain some back by calling strangers from the prison phones. In “Looker,” two of the characters would like to forget their pasts, but while their past lives color their current ones, the story remains focused on present conflicts. “Don’t Tell Me” is somewhat of an outcast in this collection, in that it is an entirely retrospective story in which the narrator recalls the joys and insecurities associated with an old girlfriend, as a way of reflecting on who he used to be and why this relationship might not have worked out.

In “Actors,” Bret feels helpless when he’s confronted with the idea that he’s not talented, so he creates one more test for himself. The story is not so much about loss as it is about the fear of never obtaining what you desire, the fear of failure. On the other hand, Kim fears that she is losing a certain side of Bret to his increasing bitterness and negativity. I worry about “Actors” because Bret’s condition is the most overtly sentimental and possibly manipulative to the reader. In other words, I fear the characters are reacting too much to something that has happened in the past, though at least those events are not “forever unexplained.” I am fond of the bulk of that story, but I’m not sure I’m comfortable with Bret’s backstory yet. It was absent in the original draft and added later, after workshoppers suggested the story needed something more—more weight, higher stakes, etc. I agree, I just haven’t figured out what it should look like.

In “Careful,” the fish funeral is a distraction for the actual absence—the narrator’s mother, who is only mentioned once in the story. I tried here to imply the despair and anxieties the narrator experiences as much as I could through her interactions with the other characters and the setting. This is the first story I wrote and submitted here at the

Center, and it is also the most recently revised. The original version, titled “The Go Fish Queen of the Universe,” and its subsequent revisions are drastically different from the version presented here. Initially I had written a clichéd backstory and conflict for the narrator, and afterwards, I admitted to Steve that I don’t enjoy writing exposition. The next semester, I submitted two stories (“Looker” and “Gainer,” both of which I originally submitted under different titles) that incorporated a great deal of exposition. I wanted to get better at doing it, so I tried to notice how other stories did it effectively and seamlessly, and in my own stories I tried to make characters’ histories interesting and seemingly necessary instead of feeling like obligatory plumbing or something forced. I don’t know how well I succeeded, as evidenced by my comments on “Actors,” but turning back to “Careful,” it seems I’ve come full circle. I still don’t particularly enjoy writing backstory, partly because exposition often takes the urgency out of a story and partly because explaining—like talking or writing openly about death or loss or love or anything to do with innocence—only seems to trivialize, reduce, turn to melodrama, and I feel this applies to such givens as the facts of a person’s life. And so exposition takes up about ten percent, or less, of the story, and everything else is forward-moving narration—dialogue, action, description, and a bit of interiority from the narrator. It’s my hope that this story shows, as Ben Greenman said of a fictional life, “a narrower window that professes to see the whole landscape via powers of magnification.”

In some ways, “Careful” is less ambitious than the majority of the stories here. Excluding “Human Interest,” the flash fiction piece, the scope of “Careful” is narrowest; it spans only a day’s time and takes place in one setting, the narrator’s house, though

there's a bit of movement from room to room. It's fast-paced and tight, but the story seems sure of itself, to me, even if it is still flawed.

There were moments when writing various drafts of this story, as with all these stories, when I felt I was approaching it all wrong. When the story is still in its drafting stage, there seem to me so many different ways of telling it, so many possible directions to take it—should some be cut or should more be added, should it really be told from this character's perspective or another's, should it really, in fact, begin where it ends—that it's paralyzing. Then all my anxieties about writing come flooding back, and I'm certain I've done it all wrong, failed, and will not be able to recover whatever spark I had in the beginning. I have to step away and let it sit, sometimes a few days, sometimes longer. Letting it sit increases the anxiety, of course, because all I'm doing is thinking more about the hundreds of possibilities, and how each may enhance some aspects of the story but ruin others, and about all the loose ends I'll have to tie together.

What is even worse, to me, is believing I've got something workable, almost finished, and then realizing, understanding completely, that it really *is* all wrong, and it simply won't work in its current form. With "Careful," I had a scenario I thought was interesting on the surface, but I couldn't make the pieces fit right. I'd changed the characters and conflicts several times, but each time I was writing from a perspective that was on the outside looking in. I wanted it that way, but it wouldn't click.

Finally I scrapped virtually the entire story, kept maybe a page of material, changed all the characters and conflicts once again, and started over. It was the first time I'd ever expunged such a large portion of a story, and it was not easy. What I found was that this loss ultimately liberated the narrative. After going through so many drafts,

failing at them, and tossing them all, I seemed to have a much clearer sense of what wasn't working. I began again with a character who had some urgency to her, some life, then did my best not to interfere.

But "Careful" still needs work. Though I tried to emphasize present conflicts and cut exposition, there may not be enough backstory to contextualize those present conflicts. The narrator may, in fact, be read as "reacting obscurely to harms done...in the psychic past" (Baxter 71). I am still in the woods with this story. I have not yet, as I believe I've done with a couple of the others here, come out the other side.



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## ACTORS

They are at La Estancia—“A *nice* restaurant,” Kim said earlier; “a really *nice* restaurant,” she’s been saying since the first time they ate there about a year ago—celebrating an audition the agency had secured for Kim, for a recurring role as a young doctor on a network television drama. “It’s just an audition,” Kim said. “We don’t need to celebrate like this.” But Bret insisted, saying how wonderful an opportunity this was. “Huge,” he kept saying, pacing around their apartment after she told him the news. Neither could find much work lately, certainly nothing like this, their part-time jobs—hers pet-sitting and his at a shoe store—aren’t cutting it, and the truth is Bret is tired of being in a constant state of not cutting it. He doesn’t say any of this. Instead, just now, at La Estancia, he is saying how she’d be a natural for the role.

“You have such steady hands,” he says. “I have not once seen them shake. Not even a twitch.”

Kim laughs. “It’s not a surgeon, it’s just a regular doctor.”

Bret refills his wine glass, then reaches across the white linen tablecloth to Kim’s, but she shakes her head and covers the glass with her hand. They are close to the end of their second bottle, and Kim knows they will stop off somewhere on the way home, so she wants to pace herself. She also has his condition to consider—she usually doesn’t let him drink this much, and she’s already thinking about how to convince him to go straight home instead of to a bar.

But Bret tips the bottle anyway, and the wine splashes on her knuckles and strains through her fingers into the glass. She lets out a gleeful shriek.

“See what I mean?” Bret says. “Steady.”

“I can’t drink this,” Kim says, wiping her hand clean. “I simply won’t.”

“You’re the doctor,” Bret says. He sips his wine and leans back. At the bar, a young man and woman sitting under a starry cluster of lights look like they’re fighting. Her eyes are wide and her mouth and hands move in flurries, and Bret recalls a night when, in those very same seats, he and Kim pretended to have an explosive argument about which side of the shower to keep the soap. Kim stormed out, all sobs and fake tears, and Bret stared meanly at his gin and tonic for another five minutes before putting on his coat and meeting Kim down the street. They laughed hand in hand back to their apartment. Both are actors, after all, and it isn’t the easiest art to practice.

Bret notices a little boy a few tables over has been staring at him, and he wonders if maybe the boy recognizes him from his latest gig. Currently, Bret plays the Maytag Repairman, but the contract is only for a couple of in-person appearances, no commercials or print ads—they already have a guy for that. He is one of a dozen or so who play the part regionally, usually when it is time to hand out checks to local organizations as part of a grant program Maytag sponsors every year. As it happened, two Boys and Girls Club locations in the Chicago area were chosen to receive grant money. Bret gave his spiel and handed over the big check at the first club the day before, and he is due at the second sometime in the next week. La Estancia is only a few blocks from the first club, so it seems possible the boy could’ve been there yesterday. The boy keeps staring, and without the blue work suit and cap, Bret feels exposed.

“Does that mean you’re going to start calling me Dr. Kim?” she says, and then the waiter appears with the check.

“That’s where I’ve seen you,” the waiter says. “Now I remember. You’re that doctor from the allergy commercial.” And it was true. Kim and Bret were both in a commercial for a new nasal spray product. It was where they first met. Kim played the doctor and Bret the patient. They served as the background imagery, seen but not heard, Bret apparently relaying his dissatisfaction with his previous nasal spray and Kim recommending this new brand, while a mellow voiceover explained the product’s benefits compared to several other brands. They’d gone for coffee after, and laughed about having to demean themselves and their art to pay the rent. She’d listened to him while he talked of Berghof and Stanislavski, whom he now kept in the bag Kim had gotten him last Christmas, and they traded roles they wished they could play. Both had just moved to the city and didn’t know many people, let alone other actors. And so they fell for each other quickly, even though at the time Bret kept the Stanislavski in his back pocket, over his untucked T-shirt, and Kim thought that was pretentious. She let it go because she really did enjoy being with him, walking through the city streets in the early morning before the heat took hold, and he only rarely read the book when they stopped at a coffee shop or deli. This was back in the hot dream of summer. Now it was late spring again, and getting hotter every day.

“Yes, that was me,” Kim says to the waiter.

“I knew it. Hey, I bought that nose spray—my allergies are pretty fucked up—and it gave me diarrhea. What do you think that’s all about?”

“Oh, I’m not really a doctor. I’m just an actor.”

“Really? ‘Cause the caption on the commercial said you were not an actor. It said you were a real doctor.”

“Yeah, they lied, I guess.”

“Guess so.” The waiter takes Bret’s card and leaves.

“Strange,” Bret says.

“I know. I thought everyone knew they lied about those things.”

“No, I meant it was strange that he didn’t recognize me.”

“Didn’t he?”

“He directed everything at you.”

“He thought I was a doctor.”

The boy and his family get up to leave. Yesterday, with all the kids gathered on the floor in front of him, Bret talked of reliability and dependability, virtues the club had shown in the past, which is why they were being rewarded now. A kid shot a spitball at him, hitting his ankle. A poor shot, but everyone still laughed.

“How could he not recognize me? They even did a close-up on my face with that stupid nozzle stuck up my nose.”

“I’m sure he recognized you. He was just concerned about his fucked up allergies and his fucked up bowel movements.”

“In fact, something has just now occurred to me. I’m just now realizing that the only reason I got that part is because I have nostrils like swimming pools.”

“Bret.” Kim starts to say something but is interrupted by the waiter, who says there’s been an issue with the card.

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At their apartment, Kim sits on the couch watching TV, a blanket draped over her legs. Bret wasn’t in the mood to stop for a drink, so they went straight home. She sips

from a glass of wine, from the second bottle at dinner, which she corked and brought along when Bret refused to do it himself. After everything, he just wanted to get home, and she understood. She agreed with him, as they walked, about the general public's lack of appreciation for subtlety, and she listened while he explained all the ways he conveyed emotion without words in that ad. He has a tendency to overreact, she knows, but all the same it repulses her. They had to stop a few blocks from their building and rest on a vacant stoop. She acted impatient, and he said it was the sudden change of weather that was doing it to him—a recent and unexpected cold snap had put a relative chill into the streets—but Kim knows better.

Bret stands with the TV remote in hand, searching for their commercial. Whenever they'd catch it on cable, spontaneously, it had a strangely erotic effect, and always led to intense love-making. But Bret had recorded it, knowing it wouldn't run much longer and they might never have another chance to be on screen at the same time. Somehow, Kim always thought, recording it dulled the eroticism.

Bret finds the recording and plays it.

"Here's what I was talking about. Now watch," he says. "Just there! Did you see? That thing I did with my eyebrows?"

"I didn't see anything," Kim says.

"It was almost imperceptible," Bret says.

"I think it *was* imperceptible."

"There it was again! Did you see?"

She puts her hand over one of her eyes, then the other. "What am I looking at?" she says.

He scoffs. “Acting,” he says. “That’s acting.”

Suddenly Kim’s head hits his shoulder, as if it had been attached to a string that was just snipped. “I’m dead,” she says. Another game, the object of which is to resuscitate the dead party by any means necessary. Traditional CPR is usually not enough, but paper balls launched from across the room at Kim’s face often brings her back, and Bret is ticklish around the knees.

“I’m being serious,” Bret says. He scoots to the end of the couch and Kim’s face smacks the cushions, mouth hanging open. She works up a thick wine-spit and lets it pool on the couch. Bret turns off the TV and leaves her there. He gets in bed and reads Stella Adler in the milky light from the nightstand lamp. In a few minutes, Kim appears in the doorway, wiping drool from her mouth with the back of her hand. Bret shaved his head to fit the clean-cut Maytag Repairman part, and for a moment Kim is startled by the man lying in her bed. She notes that the shaved head makes him look more sickly than usual.

Bret has a rare kind of bile deficiency, which, as it was explained to him years ago, would make it harder for him to emulsify fat, which would then build up and put pressure on his heart and lungs and other major organs. He would need to take things easy, he would get headaches and be short of breath. He would be plagued by gall stones the rest of his life. The main thing—the worst thing—was that his condition might cause a chain reaction of other terrible events, and this could happen at any time. There was an uncertainty about his future, and there wasn’t much to be done about it. He would be put on a transplant waiting list, but he was assured there would be a great deal of waiting. He’d been told all of this by an intern, while the regular doctor stood by, watching her and nodding periodically, as if this whole thing was an oral exam. The doctor had

corrected the intern once, when she used “gagillian” to denote the number of functions the liver performs for the body.

Kim knew to some degree that there was an opportunity—there must have been one, at the start of it—for his illness to give him a certain enthusiasm for life, a predictable gusto for the little things: strong coffee, bitter-tasting beer, favorite T-shirts. But instead it had made him mean and pitiful. Maybe that was why she jibed him so much, poked fun at him, even, occasionally, at his limitations. She wanted him to see that even the worst things could be laughed at.

But it wasn't just that. There was something else, something tied to the role-playing. She thought that, as actors, they'd experienced enough drama, tried first to artificially embody it, because it was not theirs, and then to give personal fire and feeling to enough of it, that they'd come out the other side wiser, protected from how it might try to hurt them in their own lives.

“You're no fun,” she says to him now.

“You're a laugh *riot*,” he says, his voice sinking into a breathy cough.

She takes off her clothes, gets in bed next to him, and throws her hair all over his face.

\*\*\*

Bret has been getting fewer hours at the shoe store, and he fills his time by combing through episode after episode of television dramas that feature recurring female doctor roles. He's looking for a character similar to the one Kim will be auditioning for. A young woman who has been hardened—and spurred—by her upbringing in a South Side Chicago neighborhood, but who shows an oversized heart in her interactions with



patients. Nothing, Bret thinks, like Kim, who grew up in Hartford and studied acting in Bronxville. But the past isn't important. What is important is that Kim throw herself—really, completely throw her entire being—into this new role. Shadowing a real doctor with a similar background would be ideal, but Bret doesn't have the time or means to vet all the doctors in the area, so the next best thing is to study the character as it already exists on television.

He narrows it down to three characters who more or less fill the bill; only their hometowns differ—each supposedly grew up in a low income neighborhood, in either Boston, Baltimore, or Atlanta.

Bret creates a bookmarked folder on his laptop for all the episodes these doctors are in. He also includes background information on the characters and the show, and he types notes regarding any useful techniques he's noticed. He watches the shows for hours, whenever he's alone.

When he finally tells Kim about it, she says, "It's a waste of time. They'll probably just take whoever looks the part anyway."

"Maybe, but maybe they specifically asked for people who look the part," he says. "Didn't Jeannie mention anything about this?"

"She just said I got an audition for this role, and then she told me about the role and sent the lines. She didn't say anything about the character's hair color or shoe size."

"We need a new agency."

Kim pours a glass of wine. "You're making me anxious," she says.

"If you're anxious, then you're not confident. And above all else, you need to be confident. The rest will follow."

“Why am I the only one who drinks around here anymore?” she says, and he gives her a look. “Okay, fine,” she says. “What’ve you got?”

He shows her the folder on his laptop.

“Jesus. I was just going to memorize the lines,” she says.

“The particular scenes don’t matter as much. Knowing your lines doesn’t even matter much,” he says. “What matters is that you know the character inside and out. If the character comes naturally, you’ll know how to act in any situation. Which is why, after watching and studying all these scenes, from now until the audition, you will always be in character.”

“I really don’t think all this is necessary,” she says.

“Fine, if you don’t trust me,” he says and shrugs. “I’m just saying, I’ve read a lot about this.”

“Yes, we all have.”

“Okay, you don’t have to do all three. Just the one from Boston, and then the Method stuff. It’s necessary.”

She pours more wine and corks the bottle. They stare at each other for a moment.

“I’ll do it if you stop looking at me like that,” she says.

“Like what?”

“Like you’re better than me.”

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“They call me Ol’ Lonely,” Bret says to the group of kids sitting in front of him.

“Does anyone know why?”

“Why?” they say in unison, as if they rehearsed it.

The air in the gym is warm and thick. Kim dropped him off late on her way to the audition. When he arrived, he spoke briefly to the club's board members, then prepared for the presentation in the gym, where the kids had been playing while they waited for him. The club serves a poor neighborhood, and its resources have been spread thin, which might explain why posters outlining the planets' plodding voyages around the sun hang in the gym. Something had to go on the whitewashed cinderblock walls, against which a few of the kids are now huddled. A salty heat still radiates from their bodies. Bret has to step back.

"It's because Maytag appliances are so reliable that the Maytag Repairman—me!—sits around all day with nothing to do!" Bret says.

A voice from the back—deeper than most of the kids'—says, "That's the tits. Where do I sign?"

"Reliability is important to our company," Bret continues through the ensuing laughter, "and that's why we're rewarding you today, because we think your club is the epitome of reliability and dependability."

After the speech, Bret poses with the board members and the check. There are more reporters and cameramen today, and the chatter among the board members seems livelier. One cameraman asks him if he'd like to do an interview for a short evening spot.

"Of course, of course," Bret says. He picks up a microwave he uses as a prop and follows the news team down the hallway into a small room that contains a large table, so large that it occupies almost all the floor space. The camera has to be set up on one side of the table, while the reporter—a pretty young redhead with a pale, clean face and bright red lips—and Bret stand on the other side.

The reporter hooks a microphone to Bret's waist and feeds the wire up through his shirt. She has to undo a couple buttons and reach in to pull it up.

"Probably would've been easier going the other way," she says, smiling. "Down."

Bret answers the interview questions in character, the whole time thinking about watching later with Kim.

"Hey," the cameraman says. "The air conditioning came on toward the end there. Let's redo those last couple questions."

"Here, why don't we do it over with the microwave?" Bret says. "If nothing else, I can just lean my elbow on it." He grabs the microwave's handle, but when he lifts up, the door yanks off its hinges cleanly and the microwave crashes to the floor.

The reporter squeals and jumps back.

"Sorry!"

"It's okay, we got enough," she says and asks for the microphone.

The two leave, and as Bret is trying to refit the microwave door and make his own exit, one of the club's directors approaches him and says, "Thanks again."

"Well, you know, we really do want to reward success," Bret says. "You've made a real impact in this community, and we think you have the potential to make even more of an impact."

"Well, thanks. What did you say your name was?"

"Ol' Lonely," Bret says.

"Hey," the director says, "you don't have to keep up the shtick. What do you go by in the real world?"

"This thing may be busted. Funny. Well, it's not the real deal, anyway."

“And your name was?” the director says, an easy grin spreading.

“It’s Bret.”

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As she pulls into the address where the auditions are being held, Kim thinks, What would this doctor do now? Over the past few days, she has been trying hard to become this doctor character, first because she saw how it improved Bret’s mood, and really because she wants this part just as badly as he wants it for her.

Perhaps, she thinks, this doctor would notice things about her surroundings. The building. The building is nondescript. Kim parks and gets out. It’s hot. Birds chirp. Nearby, freshly cut grass. What would this doctor be thinking? This doctor would think it strange that she is going to audition for a part as a doctor on a network television drama.

Inside, it’s freezing. The room is packed with women about Kim’s age, all of them practicing lines aloud. Kim can’t count them all. An extremely short woman at the front desk hands Kim a clipboard and asks her to sign her name. She hesitates. The realization takes hold of her heart like two hands: I am not a doctor. I don’t know the first thing about being a doctor. Bret is full of shit.

She takes a seat and waits, much longer than she expected. She feels fifteen again, waiting in line at the DMV for three and a half hours only to discover she didn’t have all the forms. Finally her name is called. The same short woman from the front desk leads her into another, smaller room, where a few people sit at a folding table. It is, she knows for certain now, another bleak audition in a long string of bleak auditions. She reads lines with an Asian American woman playing an experienced nurse, but Kim reads as if in a trance. The amazing thing is that she’s able to keep going. At the end, she thanks the

room and exits quickly. A man sitting at the table tries to say something to Kim, but she doesn't hear him.

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She's late. Bret has been waiting in the playground adjacent to the Boys and Girls Club gym for over an hour. He sits on the tire swing in his Maytag uniform, like an action figure come to life. The sun is high. Sweat beads across his hairline and above his ears. His undershirt sticks to his back uncomfortably. He would've waited in the gym, but they locked all the doors after the ceremony.

He has tried calling Kim several times, but no answer. He takes all of this to mean that the audition went well, and they kept her for more read-throughs, or maybe even to decide on contract terms. He should be happy, but he is utterly depressed.

The club is in a part of town he's not familiar with, and all of a sudden it feels like an entirely different city. The bright oranges, blues and yellows of the playground equipment look cosmic against the subdued grays and spruce-greens of the houses surrounding the club. Bret remembers a story he saw on one of the local stations long ago, a threat of lawsuit some residents made against an elementary school because the school's newly built playground was too noisy at certain times of the day.

Bret has a view of a wreck that just happened on a nearby boulevard. What he's been able to catch is just the aftermath—the police questioning, the directing of traffic onto the narrow shoulder. A few cruisers' blue lights flash, but the sirens have long stopped. Bret is struck by the silence of the whole scene, as if it should have happened in the deep darkness of some obscure hour of night.

He had doubted himself much more often in the beginning, especially in college. The movement exercises in his acting classes gave him trouble; he often had to sit out. Later, his advisor discussed rather bluntly the likelihood of his ever making a name for himself in this industry, and not just because of his condition. He was not talented enough, the advisor said. He might have had some talent, but that was lethal—it kept you going when it would have been wise to give it up.

He told all this to a cab driver the first night he moved to Chicago, the fear and self-doubt magnified now that he was confronted with the city, though the cab driver seemed not to have understood. He kept telling Bret about the celebrities he'd driven around. "Look," he said. "Is where I picked up Meryl Streep. Took to Wrigley. Big baseball fan."

Eventually he got around the self-doubt by concluding it was just luck whether you succeeded or not, regardless of your limitations. And when he'd had no luck, he became more determined. He was desperate, still is. He had never allowed himself to really believe he would not make it, but now, on the playground, sweating through a repairman costume, he is beginning to allow it.

Bret takes off the jacket and walks around the playground, kicking up dust and wood chips near the swings. He starts to climb the ladder to the slide, but midway up he decides against it. He walks to the chain link fence at the back of the playground and goes through the gate. He's on a residential street, heavily shaded and noiseless, which slopes up to the left and dead-ends to the right with a ROAD CLOSED sign attached to an orange and white striped barricade, and beyond that, a stand of dark, aggressive-looking

trees. He walks through the yard of the house closest to him, climbs the steps and rings the doorbell.

A bald man wearing a robe answers the door, and Bret explains that he is a Maytag quality inspector visiting houses in the area to take inventory of any Maytag appliances that need repairs. He spouts off some key phrases and facts about the company. Seeing the man's discomfort, Bret offers, "It's a new thing we're doing."

"Where's your truck?" the man says.

"It's parked on the other side of that slope," Bret says, pointing. "I've made my way down on foot."

"Where're your tools?"

"I don't repair the appliances, I just take inventory of what needs work and then I send for a specialist."

"Shouldn't you have a clipboard or something?"

Bret removes his phone from his pocket and shows it to the man. "All digital now."

The man nods. "I don't have any Maytag appliances," he says and shuts the door quickly.

No one answers at the next house.

At the third house, a squat woman with curls like pencil shavings opens the door.

"Well," she says, looking around, "I do have a vacuum's broken."

"I'll have a look."



She leads Bret into a hallway and opens a closet door. “It’s somewhere in there,” she says. “Been busted a long time now. Never did work more than a couple weeks after I got it.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Bret says and begins sifting through the junk in the closet. The woman says she’ll be in the kitchen and leaves Bret alone. He moves some coats that are hanging up, and he is so thrilled that he wants to embrace them. He finds the vacuum and has no idea what to do with it. He wonders if there’s anything worth stealing in the closet, but it’s mostly just old clothes and lampshades, and anyway, he’s already accomplished what he came to do.

He hears the woman’s voice in the kitchen, soft and low, and then another, deeper voice. Soon a man with a thick black mustache peeks into the closet and says, “Hey, bud, how’s it coming?”

“Great,” Bret says. “There’s a small issue, but I think my man can get it resolved.”

“Good, good,” the man says. “How much do I owe you?”

“Oh, nothing,” Bret says. “Absolutely free of charge. Maytag—”

“Yeah, listen, I called Maytag, and they don’t know anything about a free quality inspection service,” the man says. “The other thing, you’re holding a Hoover, and it works just fine. The Maytag must be somewhere else in all that crap.”

Bret’s phone buzzes in his pants, loud enough that they both can hear it.

“Don’t answer that,” the man says. “Now, I don’t know who you are or what you’re trying to do here, but I do know that you’re going to leave this house immediately or we’re going to have a problem, and the bat’s going to solve it.” He steps into the

doorway holding an orange and gray aluminum alloy Louisville Slugger in front of him with both hands, like a drawn sword.

“I’m going,” Bret says. He holds his hands up and walks slowly toward the front door, eyes to the ground, the man following behind. The woman squeals as he passes, and Bret looks up to offer an apology.

“Don’t look at her,” the man says. “She’s got a butcher knife, if you really want to know.”

Bret takes off running as soon as he steps outside, his instincts telling him he shouldn’t have gotten off that easily. He approaches a hedge and tries to hurdle it—he’s seen this feat performed many times in film and television—but his trailing foot catches the top of the bush. His face hits the hard grass and he feels the lush crunch of bones shifting. A moan escapes his throat, and he rolls over. No one is around.

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Driving, Kim tries to think of a worse audition than the one she just left, but she can’t. She blames Bret. She blames his instruction, his whole faulty outlook on acting and on life. When he was trying to prepare her for this audition, there was a scene.

They were in Clarendon Park, near where they lived. It was a mild day, and they’d brought a picnic of white cheddar, French bread, a hunk of summer sausage, wedges of green apples, and purple Concord grapes. They sat close to the baseball diamond and looked up occasionally when they heard the clink of bat and ball to see someone rounding first. She thought about how much more bearable the winter would be if things worked out with the audition. They wouldn’t complain so much about going outside. They would stick it out because they would have places to go, money to spend.

She wanted to go somewhere then, and she considered suggesting Montrose Beach, which was only just east of them, across Lake Shore. They could walk, even with the picnic stuff, and maybe stop at the skate park and watch the skinny teens glide along the smooth concrete bowls, offer them cigarettes if they were approached.

Another couple walked by and struck up a conversation. They thought they lived in the same building as Bret and Kim. Bret offered them the bag of grapes, and immediately the man started choking. His cheeks and forehead went crimson, and he fell to one knee. The woman didn't kneel with him, but instead turned to Kim and shouted, "Do something!" Kim, shocked, brought out her phone and started to punch in 911, but Bret took the phone from her and said, "Okay, that's enough, guys."

The man cleared his throat and stood up. It was a sham, a test, Bret explained.

Kim couldn't speak. She watched the couple walk a few paces away and lean against a tree.

"Obviously you're still not prepared," Bret said.

"You're joking, right? You really must be joking with all of this."

"The impulse to assist is at the core of people in the medical profession, but it's felt early in life, by everyone. You have it, too, but you have to get to a point where you're acting spontaneously based on that impulse. Well, that's one aspect of this role, at least, but it's only going to work if you offer yourself up to this."

Was that his Stanislavski, or did he just make it up? She watched him join the couple at the tree, and she heard him congratulate them on their performance.

Did he really offer himself up to Ol' Lonely, the Maytag Repairman? Was he really inspired to shave his head and put on that hot suit and strut around spewing lines about reliability?

He was, and that was what separated the two of them, she thought. He relished the worst of the whole enterprise and thought better of himself for it.

Now she's at the Boys and Girls Club, but she doesn't see Bret. She parks near a playground, and her phone rings. It's Jeannie.

"What?" Kim says.

"What? Oh, no, that's not how you want to remember beginning this conversation."

"Jeannie, can we just do this the normal way? Where you say something and then I say something, then we take it from the top?"

"You got a callback."

"What?"

"Now, see, now it sounds right."

Just then she sees Bret, still in his blue uniform but missing the cap, sprinting across bright green lawns.

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"Oh, God," Kim says, bending to Bret.

"Where have you been?" he says. "I tried calling you. I've been waiting out here for hours."

“The audition.” She wipes the sweat from his forehead. Blood is beginning to dry above his upper lip. She helps him up and holds his head with one hand, touches his nose with the other. “Where does it hurt?”

“You didn’t say your lines that way, did you?” he says.

She steps away from him. “What if I did?”

“Were you really that flat and uncompassionate? I mean, I wasn’t exactly convinced you cared where it hurt.” He dabs at the blood with his cuff.

She has an impulse to punch him, but it subsides. She watches him take his hat off and wipe sweat from his head, and again, without his hair, in that uniform, he seems like someone else. He really should have kept the hair, it was good hair, long and straight and coffee-brown. He used to tie it into a tight ball at the back, and when she touched it, it was dense as a roll of nickels. And his nostrils, they really are like swimming pools, he was right. She wants to tell him about the hair, wants to tell him that she hates his head shaved and that this is not the way to go. This way will only get you so far, and what about the rest? They’d been kidding themselves. Doesn’t Bret know that? She wants to offer him another option, a way out. She looks past him and sees two pairs of eyes peeping through the blinds of the house behind him. She screams and throws herself on him. He catches her, his elbows locking under her arms.

“This is not the time,” he says. “Stand up. I’ll drop you if you don’t stand up.” He starts toward the car, her feet dragging along the grass. Doors open and people step onto their porches. Bret sees the mustached man, bat in hand, walking toward him. “Nothing to see here, folks,” Bret says, shuffling back faster, trying to shift Kim’s body so he can reach the keys in her hand. “She’s just acting. We’re actors.”

## HUMAN INTEREST

They've restricted the timeframe for telephone calls because I was dialing people all over town. It's a collect call, but I've found that most people will accept the charges, worrying someone they know and care about has been incarcerated.

Then, usually very quickly, they understand they don't know me. They say, "You've got the wrong number," and I say, "You're probably right." They say, "Don't call here again," and I say, "I'd be amazed if I did."

It's become an issue, I guess, because today the local paper has sent a reporter to talk to me. He asks who I call, people I know or random numbers. I lie and say just random. Every once in a while I call my wife, but we are not on speaking terms—for a number of reasons beginning with our estrangement and ending with me violating restraining orders in various ways, so if she answers, I don't say anything. I listen to her breathing, but neither of us hangs up. Then I start singing, sometimes just bits and pieces of songs, but always a minor key thing, and if I don't know all the words I just ride the tune, my voice rising and falling and unstringing itself from my end to hers. She listens. I know she listens because right when I go quiet, she hangs up.

"We would like to know why you're doing this," the reporter says. "Are you looking for money?" He offers me a stick of gum.

"No," I say, taking the gum. I break it down the middle and put half in my mouth.

Like nearly all reporters, he wears a tweed jacket and small round glasses. It's January, and his cheeks are still red from the cold. He's trying too hard, with the tweed and round glasses and questions. He lowers his notepad, takes off his glasses and says, "You wanted some real human contact, is that it?"

To which I say, “I have plenty of opportunities for real human contact.”

“With the outside world, I mean.”

“Yeah, that must be it.”

I wasn't the only one to do it. I used to take turns with White Bubba. They call him White Bubba because, though he's black, there's another black Bubba here, and he's darker than my friend. You can probably guess what they call him—Black Bubba. Prison is full of these annoying little redundancies.

The reporter scribbles on his pad. “May I see what you've written?” I ask. He shows me the pad. “You misspelled my name,” I say. I take his pencil and correct the mistake. “So, that's everything, right?” I say, handing back the pad. “Who what when where why?”

*Wheel of Fortune* plays on the television behind the reporter. A large woman has won a trip to Italy and half a Mercedes, so far.

“It's not really that kind of piece,” the reporter says. “It's more of a feature, like, human interest.”

Once, White Bubba called the guy who turned him in. He was going to threaten him, tell him, in so many words, to watch his back, he had connections, all that. He was getting excited talking about it. But when he dialed, no one answered. “Fuck you,” White Bubba said into the phone. “Fuck you,” he said twelve more times. I told him the guy probably knew who it was calling. I don't think that ever crossed his mind. “Fuck you, too,” he said.

“I've talked to some of the other men, and they suggested you probably do it out of boredom,” the reporter says, “since there's not much else to do.”

To which I shake my head. “You’re way off. You’re looking at the wrong end of the line.”

Say an Italian man answers and screams at me for a few moments, then hangs up. I imagine his wife asking who it was, what all the screaming was about, and then his son asking, in English, and the father having to explain it again in half-English. But the son gets the gist of it and tells his friends about it the next day on the bus, embellishes, a frightening new note added to each retelling. Suddenly I’m a lunatic who was threatening his father’s life, etc. Kids who used to bully him stop their bullying. A girl who always thought of him as a loser is suddenly drawn to him. He’s shown that there are parts of his life no one knows about—interesting, compelling, possibly dark or sinister parts, hidden from view. The girl’s intrigued, they start dating, their life together careens, dips, stalls, picks up steam, they get married even though he doesn’t get along with her mother and even though for a long time she has known every side of him.

Or, say I dial my house and my wife answers. I listen to her breathing, listen for other sounds. I sing—those sad, sad little songs—and I imagine her over there perched on the kitchen counter where the yellow land line is mounted on the wall below the gray elephant-face clock, which she glances at out of habit, then looks through the doorway into the living room, where on the couch is an assortment of elephant-shaped pillows and on the bookshelves are porcelain and oven-baked clay elephants glazed in blues and greens, an elephant from every occasion, elephant everything because she has always felt herself big and unpretty. She has filled the house with them. As I sing to her, the taupe elephant teakettle blasts a high note, she hops off the counter, presses the receiver to her



shoulder. The cord tightens behind as she moves to the stove in a slight hobble, a give on her right foot, which is missing two toes.

She used to say I never told her anything. “Tell me something,” she’d say. “What else? *More*. What else?”

I tell the reporter less and less. He doesn’t want to know, really. I’m not going to sing to him either.

Again he removes his glasses, pinches his nose. He gets up to leave, handing me his card, says he wants to talk further. But I think they’ve had enough of me and my phone calls, so I give him back his gum, the chewed-up half, something to remember me by.

## GAINER

Along the fence that separated the pool from the golf course was a white wooden shed, which housed a network of six large gray tanks that controlled the pool's vitals: temperature, chemical levels, water level, filtration. The room was dark, the one bulb still in need of replacement, and hummed deceptively; it had recently become infested with wasps.

It was from this shed that Audrey emerged, sprinting, her arms dotted with stings. Without thinking she plunged into the pool, the chlorine pricking the red bumps. She held her breath until her lungs ached, then returned to the surface and scrambled onto the ledge. She stole back to the Hawaiian-themed snack bar and wrapped herself in a towel.

The lifeguards began to show up, including Liz, looking breezy in an electric blue cover-up. She smiled Audrey's way and kept walking, and Audrey, despite her injuries, hoped she didn't turn, would rather not have to discuss this embarrassment with anyone, let alone Liz. Things were different now, but Audrey and Liz had been inseparable growing up, had become attached to each other at a young age simply because they shared the same name—Audrey—which they would come to associate with sophistication, a name from an older generation that drank dry martinis and listened to jazz LPs. And in fact, as they grew up together, before Liz had started going by the abbreviation of her middle name, they did listen to jazz records. Audrey's parents had crates full of them. The girls stood on chairs to reach the wine glasses and let them overflow with tap water and olives. They danced in flapper getups even though they were listening to Charlie Parker or Charles Mingus. They stayed up late and wrote letters to their idols. They asked questions to the living. To the dead, they gushed.

Then Liz developed early, and though she was pale and wore corrective mouth gear, she became a moving target to the boys in their class. She first experimented with going by Elizabeth, then Liz, and toward the end of middle school she didn't want to listen to records anymore. The mouth gear came off soon enough, and now, a short summer away from being a sophomore in high school, she was deeply tan and very blonde, with the leg-to-abdomen ratio of a tall flamingo. Audrey didn't consider herself ugly, not exactly, but for one thing, she didn't like what a young lifetime of competitive swimming had done to the width of her shoulders, and worse, she was shy. With the records, the record player itself, Audrey had always felt adult and essential, part of something. Now it all embarrassed her. She felt naïve, like she'd spent all of her time fostering a lifestyle that none of the kids she knew valued, and because Liz had effectively abandoned it all, while Audrey was still trying to learn the piano parts to "Blue in Green" in secret hopes of starting a modal jazz cover band with her friend. Ever since their gradual separation, Audrey had been avoiding Liz, who remained friendly but equally distant, but it was harder now that they worked at the same club pool, and especially right that second, with all those wasp stings turning Audrey's arms into blazing red flares.

As if on cue, Liz did a double take and changed course, hopping a corner of the shallow end on her way to the snack bar. "Your arms," she said. "What happened?"

"Wasps in the backwashing room. I was the first one here so I thought I would start the backwashing, but when I reached around the tanks for the switches I must have hit a nest," she said. "No one mentioned wasps."

Liz gaped. She held her hands over Audrey's arms. "Do you need to go to the hospital? Do you need some aspirin?"

"It's okay, I already got some," Audrey lied, and looked away. She squinted at the pool as if it was suddenly empty. "No big deal," she said.

"Another shirt, at least? I think I've got one in my locker. Be right back."

"Oh, thanks."

Liz strode away but got caught up talking to Chris Moffett, another lifeguard, whom she'd been dating. Two years older than Audrey and Liz, Chris would be a senior in the fall. He was older, but not as old as the other lifeguards, all college students home for the summer. Every year they returned to school early, leaving the pool understaffed. In anticipation of this exodus, Liz was hired to lifeguard, and later Audrey, to work the snack bar.

It was just 10 a.m., but Mr. Larsen, who was missing an arm, asked Audrey for eight Budweisers. She set the beer in a cooler and shoveled ice into it, then lifted the cooler onto the counter, her arms throbbing.

"What's all that?" Larsen said. "Chicken pox?"

"Wasps," she said, trying to sound—to a man who'd lost an arm in a motorcycle accident—like she didn't care about a few stings.

Larsen nodded and fished one of the beers from the cooler. "You know what I'd do?" he said.

"What?" Audrey didn't trust her eyes not to wander to his nubby shoulder blade, so she looked past him. Liz and Chris were setting red buoys by the lifeguard stands.

Chris disappeared into the men's locker room, and Liz climbed the stand near the diving board.

Larsen drained the beer. "May I have another one of those?" he said.

Audrey handed him another beer. He put it in the cooler, said thanks and walked off.

Audrey scraped at the stingers with her fingernail. She thought about calling her mother and begging for a ride home, but after feigning toughness to Liz and then Mr. Larsen, she knew she would stay. She walked to the locker room to change into a long-sleeve shirt she kept there, and to search any unpadded lockers for a bottle of aspirin.

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Liz watched Chris mount the lifeguard stand by the shallow end. Up on the other stand near the diving board, Liz could see everything. She could see every area of the pool, the snack bar, most of the sunbathers in their chairs, the locker rooms, the backwashing room, and next to that, the cinderblock under which she and Chris deposited cigarette butts. Beyond the fence, her view was of the sixteenth hole. Depending on the leafage in the trees that bordered the fairway, she could sometimes make out the club's logo on the white flag on the green.

She saw Audrey laboring with a big cooler, her forehead sweating, arms swollen. She held it with both hands and let it rest on the side of her leg as she walked. She had to put it down, take a break. It amazed Liz that no one had offered to help her. If Chris were not on the other stand, Liz thought, he would carry the cooler for her. Chris's short blond hair was thinning and receding, even graying in spots. His scalp burned easily, so every morning he sprayed sunscreen all over his head. His hair flashed in the sun and then

hardened to a consistent crunch. Liz felt a satisfying grating whenever she ran her hands through his hair.

“Can I go?” said a little girl wearing inflatable armbands, teetering on the edge of the diving board.

“Yes,” Liz said. “One bounce and jump straight out.” Liz no longer held her breath every time a child jumped, but she made sure to spell out the rules and she scolded the ones who didn’t listen. She was careful because she had no real training. Chris was supposed to train her, but instead they snuck into the pool at night, where they drank rum and kissed and swam together in the cool, dark water. She liked him because he wasn’t like the other boys she’d been with, who pawed and groped and tried to get her bra off before she’d had a chance to unbuckle her seatbelt. Chris was different, older, more experienced, knew the value in making a game of it. Liz was starting to understand that there were different speeds at which relationships could develop, and this was liberating. In three weeks of being alone at the pool at night, they had not gone past second base. When things got heavy, Liz would slip into the water and backstroke to the deep end. Chris would follow in an easy freestyle, and they would float around each other, come together, break away. Sometimes they had contests to see who could hold their breath longer. When the training sessions were almost over, and Liz still couldn’t guard a life, she asked him, “What if something happens? What if someone starts drowning while I’m up there?”

“I’ll be there,” he said.

They were floating near the diving board. Liz felt an exhilarating sensation in her kicking legs. She wanted something solid under them. She swung her arms up as if she

were doing a jumping jack and propelled herself down. She let the air out of her lungs until her feet touched the grainy bottom. The water was light as Chris' hands around her body, and she kept exhaling, the bubbles rising to the surface, to let him know that he'd better move.

"Can I go?" said the same little girl.

"Yes," Liz said, turning her chair to face the diving board. "Wait!" She pointed at her own chest and then at the girl, whose top had been forced up to her shoulders after her last jump.

The girl looked down, tried to adjust her top but the armbands were so big that she couldn't reach her own body. "I can't," she said.

"It's okay, just go," Liz said. She thought: little slut. But there was nothing Liz could do, it wasn't her job to instill and uphold moral fortitude in these kids. She scanned the deck. The adults had settled in with their beer and tumblers of gin. They spent their summers in dark sunglasses, nodding off and coming to in the heat.

Wallace, the pool manager, surveying the pool from inside his office, caught her eye. He wore a gold cloth robe patterned with salmon-colored dragons, the red sash around his waist tied into a large bow in the front. His usual summer-wear. Liz had complimented him on the robe once, calling it a kimono, and he'd corrected her. "*Yukata*," he'd said, hammering the consonants. "A specific kind of kimono." He also wore those raised wooden sandals with the cloth thongs, which she'd seen before in television and movies. "*Geta*," Chris liked to say, parroting Wallace.

Liz flipped her hair, thought of how bright it must be shining, smiled and winked. Why did she do that? She wasn't attracted to Wallace, of course, though he was

appealing in a distinguished way, with his thick white hair and thick white teeth—an idea to be entertained now and then, like Scotch. “You’ve never had Scotch?” Chris would say. “Well, then, let’s get Scotch-drunk.” And later Liz would say, “Watch my Scotch,” then go to the locker room to check her face. So many things to try, and she was finally trying them! Daily discoveries. The frogs were one, for sure, and Scotch would be another—hopefully not as unappetizing as the frogs! She felt sorry for them like she felt sorry for the kids whose parents let them loose at the beginning of the day and gathered them up at the end without so much as a hello in between. They were too tired from their experiences, strung out by all they’d seen and accumulated in their lives. Not Liz, not yet.

At the pool, Liz was both young and pristine but also the knowing authority. She held sway over the adults in their strappy chairs. She knew about the frogs and they didn’t, and that made her feel full in a way she couldn’t describe.

She rested her feet on the warm metal bar and spread her toes. She felt like a luxurious bird folding and unfolding her wings. The little girl was back on the board, her top even further up her shoulders. “Can I go?” she asked, but Liz was somewhere else, naked in an igloo of flawless ice, her body warmed to the perfect temperature by a steady fire hovering just above her head.

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Kyle Larsen hopped on the board six times, testing the spring.

“One bounce,” the blonde lifeguard said. “One bounce and jump straight out.”

He ignored her, bounced a few more times. He ran back to the steps, counting the strides. In a moment, his lithe, eleven-year-old body flung forth into a skinny swan dive. Surfacing, he threw a few punches in the deep end, disappointed because his big toe had



landed on a particularly large bump on the diving board right before he took off, skewing his left foot.

Brad Bailey and his younger brother, Walker, floated near the ladder. Earlier they had seen a large red ant-like thing skidding across the deck like a tiny dune buggy, and they frosted it with so much roach killer that it looked like a fossil uncovered in Antarctica or Siberia, somewhere it should never have been. Later they squashed it with someone's tennis shoe. Now they were bored. As Kyle approached in his slapping freestyle, Brad said, "Six. You have earned a six."

Kyle hooked one arm around the ladder and cut his eyes. "Out of what?"

"Ten."

"What do you think?" Kyle said to Walker.

"Tres," the boy said.

"Ah, you don't know."

"Show us something else," Brad said. "You have one more chance to change your fate."

Kyle climbed out, his shorts sucking his thin legs. He pulled them loose on the way to the diving board, thinking about which trick to stun the boys with. He decided on a one-and-a-half, a flip that leads into a dive.

"Three," Brad said. "You have earned a three."

"How was that a three?" Kyle said. "That was a perfect ten, a 9.5 at least."

Brad laughed. "There's only one way to earn a perfect ten," he said.

"How?"

"Gainer."

“That’s where you run forward and do a backflip,” Walker said. “You don’t face backward.”

“I get it. But what if I did, like, a quadruple front flip?”

“9.999999—”

Kyle splashed water into Brad’s face. “I gave you a one-and-a-half. That should be worth more than a three.”

“Three,” Brad said.

“But that’s not fair,” Kyle said, turning to Walker. “What would you give it?”

“Tres,” Walker said, struggling to stay afloat while holding up three fingers. “You have earned a tres.”

\*\*\*

In one corner of the deck, near the water fountain, a box and coiled hose were mounted on the fence. If you fed it twenty-five cents, the hose would spray SPF-25 sunscreen for thirty seconds. Chris popped a quarter in the sunscreen dispenser and began spraying his head.

The dispenser was Chris’s idea, one of many. He aspired to be an inventor, or, failing that, an engineer. He wanted to work among people who would appreciate his ideas, though most of them had something to do with making himself more appealing to women. For example, he had wanted to get in shape, bulk up, but he didn’t have money to join a gym or invest in one of those all-purpose home gyms. But who needed those? Didn’t the Greeks throw rocks and lift logs to build that chiseled look? He decided to do the same, but large enough rocks and logs proved hard to come by, so he fished around dumpsters for heavy objects—an old cathode ray television set, pieces of furniture—and

attached them to a system of ropes and pulleys. He ran, too—the Greeks had probably run, he thought. Now he had cinderblocks for pecks and triceps like the knots used to tie cruise liners to piers, but his bulk was uneven because his materials were not equal in weight. His right arm was noticeably larger than his left. Also, the running had turned his legs to bone and rope. He needed to stop half-assing everything.

He still had ten or so seconds left with the hose, but Wallace called him over to one of the deck tables.

Chris sat down just as Liz passed the table, heading back to the stand with a water bottle. She ruffled his hair as she passed, said hello to Wallace.

Wallace watched her weave through recliners on her way to the stand. “Nice legs,” he said to Chris, nodding his head toward Liz. “Hm?”

“Nice for walking,” Chris said.

“I shouldn’t be looking at young women anymore,” Wallace said. “It’s okay to say hey how are you every once in a while, but I shouldn’t be looking. There’s just nothing in it.”

Wallace’s thick white hair gleamed, and Chris wondered if it was a rug. With his hair and teeth and dazzling gold robe, Wallace shone diamond-like, and Chris had to look away. He felt his own thinning hair and hoped that his scalp wasn’t burning.

“So that’s me just giving my personal opinion on that matter as an older man,” Wallace said. “But when you’re talking about a work environment, now you’re getting into morals, ethics, codes of conduct, whatever you want to call it. Age doesn’t come into it. Now, I’ve kept my back turned these first few weeks, but—you see where I’m going with this? You and Liz. It’s got to stop. It is now against pool rules.”

Wallace had a standard list of rules—no running, no rough-housing in the pool, etc.—which hung near the backwashing shed, but next to it he posted his own list of rules, handwritten commands that grew out of specific offenses he'd witnessed since taking over the pool. No reading in the water, no electronic cigarettes, no golf clubs on the pool deck, no ramps leading into the pool. That had been another of Chris's ideas. He wanted to fix grip-surface ramps to the pool ledges to allow frogs and other animals safe exit. Wallace had shot him down, and he only allowed the sunscreen dispenser because it wasn't technically Chris's idea; other pools had them.

Now Wallace handed Chris a black marker and told him what to add to the list: no romance.

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Since she started working at the snack bar a few weeks ago, Audrey had begun to notice things at the pool that she never noticed when she was out there on the recliners. She noticed that Mr. Larsen, whose wife was never at the pool, constantly walked an L shape in the shallow end, and knew everyone by name. She also noticed that his son, Kyle, spent most of his time on the diving board, alone, and that he was the most adept diver she had ever seen.

Audrey watched Kyle all day, studying his form. She could find no faults. If he didn't like his jump from the beginning, he simply abandoned whatever trick he planned and penciled into the water.

Now Kyle sat at a table near the snack bar, apparently part of a birthday party for another boy. Kyle, however, sat alone, looking bored, while the others gathered around a large table stacked with presents. A woman whom Audrey had never seen before

approached Kyle wearing a pointed party hat and holding two plates of cake. She sat next to him and pushed one of the plates his way. Neither spoke to the other. The woman ate her cake in small bites.

Audrey sweated more than usual in the long-sleeve shirt. She tried to focus on the slushy she was making, but she couldn't stop thinking about the the letters she and Liz used to write their heroes, and then she thought, with a prick of loneliness that always began in her throat, about the conversations she still sometimes imagined with those drummers, trumpeters, baritone saxers and pianists. Her parents forced her into this job because they thought it would help her make friends, or, knowing Liz worked as a lifeguard, to rekindle that friendship. She imagined Kyle in a similar situation, so, when the woman got up, Audrey told the other snack bar worker—a tall, thickly freckled boy—that she was going on break, and she sat down at the table next to Kyle.

“I've seen you up there,” she said, pointing to the diving board. “You're really good.”

Kyle smiled, revealing a mouth full of crooked teeth. “You saw the one-and-a-half.”

“Yeah, amazing,” Audrey said. She never knew what to say to people, and she was thankful for this specific topic.

“What would you give me?”

“What?”

“For the flip, what would you give me?”

“I don't understand.”

“Scale of one to ten.”

Audrey shrugged. "It was as good as I've ever seen."

"So ten."

"I guess I'd have to know what a nine looks like."

Kyle stared at his uneaten cake, forked some of the frosting off the edge. "I can show you a nine," he said. He got up just as the birthday boy began opening presents. On the diving board, he ran, jumped, dove. A good dive, almost perfect, but his right elbow flared a little.

The boy surfaced spitting water. He held up nine fingers.

Audrey clapped and nodded, cupped her hands around her mouth and cheered as he climbed the steps again. The kids at the party turned and looked at her; she blushed and pulled her sleeves over her knuckles.

Kyle was back up, now running, now jumping, now diving. He kept his elbows tucked on this one, and as the clouds settled in across the sun, for once Audrey felt glad to be working at the snack bar, glad to have found this boy who, mysterious as it was, wanted only to impress her. A voice from the party yelled "showoff," but Audrey still raised both hands, palms forward, fingers spread.

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Then it was raining. The sunbathers swiped beer from their coolers and headed for the umbrellas, already soaked. Six or seven slippery people crowded under each umbrella, sipping beer, shivering, saying things like, "But it wasn't supposed to rain until tomorrow." The sudden change of weather excited them. They seemed to have forgotten that they'd been wet all day.

A still-young husband and wife stood under the awning attached to the snack bar. They were halfway there when the rain began to come down hard. Audrey handed the man a beer. The woman called to her daughter, who was several tables down, jumping into the rain and then back under the umbrella's shelter, laughing. "Stay under the umbrella," the mother said. The girl gave her a possessed grin, stuck her foot out carefully and let the rain fall on her big toe. "What did I say?" her mother yelled, then said to her husband, "Go get the car."

He shook his can of beer. "Almost done."

"Fred, I'm ready to get the hell out of here." She held a soggy paperback close to her breast. "Bring the car to the curb."

"Settle down, honey."

"You settle down."

"All right," he said. "I'm going to get the car." He chugged and took off sprinting, dowsing his head with the rest of the beer, shrieking like a child. A few people—Audrey and the couple's daughter among them—chuckled, and Fred's wife scowled at them in turn.

A horn blared. Chris walked from umbrella to umbrella, his hair pressed to his scalp, informing the people that there was lightning in the area and they had a choice between the locker rooms or their homes. No one wanted to wait around for the best-case scenario, a few overcast hours at the pool, so they began gathering their things. Mr. Larsen signaled his son with a broad wave, but Kyle wasn't ready to leave. After that earlier annoyance with the two boys, he felt good about how his day had turned out. He was back on the diving board, a hot rain pattering at his feet and dimpling the water in

front of him. He ran to the end of the board and leapt as high and far as he could. No trick in mind, he simply jumped and landed as he may. He seemed to experience for the first time the rush of being submerged in liquid, and he lingered underwater for a long moment. When he came up, he looked across the pool and saw her standing under the snack bar awning, still watching him. His affection for her multiplied with every second it took him to get out of the water, so that when he finally reached the diving board steps, he felt such a heavy warmth for the girl that he knew he would try the gainer.

The blonde lifeguard was yelling at him to stay out of the pool, but he ignored her and climbed the steps. He figured he should jump as high as possible, so that even if he didn't have enough torque on the initial spring, he could still negotiate the flip before hitting the water. He made sure Audrey was watching. He looked right at her as he ran to the end of the board and jumped, almost straight up. Then, in a moment of distilled terror he knew he had made a mistake, had not jumped out enough, and that, horizontal, looking straight up, he could not will his body to do anything at all.

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With the pool closed for the day, Audrey went home and did not talk to anyone. In her room, she closed the curtains and lay on her bed in the dark, but she couldn't stop recalling it, how she sat there, knowing he was too close to the board, knowing his head would hit it, but paralyzed because she could do nothing and frightened and helpless by the inevitability of it.

Then, Larsen's one-armed dive into the water, and Chris's soon after. They both dragged him onto the concrete. A crowd gathered. Larsen held the boy's head in his lap and slapped his face lightly. Chris finally had to push him away to perform CPR. And



against her will Audrey noticed his triceps tightening with every push. Kyle's eyes didn't open. Someone must have called an ambulance because there it was, and there were the paramedics, checking the boy, strapping him onto a stretcher, asking for the manager, and there was Wallace, in his gold robe.

Audrey went to her closet, shuffled some clothes around, found the box of records she had stashed there awhile back. She found all the letters she had written with Liz, the ones asking questions—What do you do when your saxophone breaks?—left unsent.

She found another letter she'd written to herself about six months ago, also with Liz, during their brief reconnection. Liz had called one Sunday morning and suggested they go to youth group that night at the church their parents belonged to. It was late December, and the youth group leaders gave the kids white construction paper and colored markers and made them spread out in the gym and write down their personal goals to strive for over the next year. Audrey and Liz had lain next to each other on the painted hardwood floor, but were angled in such a way that neither could see what the other was writing.

"I put, 'Get with at least a dozen different guys'," Liz said, laughing. "What about you?"

"I put, 'Youth group is stupid, never come back'," which wasn't true; she really wrote, "Change everything about yourself." She even styled it in all-caps and underlined it twice. Then she felt she was being melodramatic, so she crossed it out and wrote "please change" in lowercase letters as small as if she had whispered them onto the page.

"Good one. I'm putting that too," Liz said. "And another one: 'Give up men.'"

Audrey took the letter to her bed and put it under her pillow. She thought about what she had done in the last six months to change herself. So far, not much. She thought about all the things she could do, the ways she could be different, until she fell asleep.

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Liz was the last to leave the pool; everyone else had been sent home immediately following the incident. She pulled down the cage that locked the reception area, slung her purse over her shoulder and started for home. The rain had stopped, but the sky was still thick and dark above the tall pine trees. Ahead, she saw Wallace's green Toyota rumbling her way. He eased up to the curb, leaned out the window and said, "Need a ride?"

"I live right down the road. I walk."

Wallace craned his neck toward the woods behind him, as if trying to spot her house among the pines. "You show me the way, and I'll take you there. Never know when the weather will turn again."

"Sure, I guess."

They got onto a street lined with houses. Wallace searched for something in his center console but closed the lid without taking anything out. "Excuse me," he said as he reached across her and opened the glove compartment.

She shifted her legs toward the door. "What are you looking for? I can find it."

"Here it is." He pulled out a CD and inserted it into the player.

"This is it," Liz said. "You can let me off here."

Wallace stopped the car near the curb. "All right then." He touched her shoulder and said, "Liz, is there any reason you didn't jump in after that boy?"

"What?"

“You were closest to him. I saw you yelling at him to get off the board.”

Liz didn't know what to say. Those nights at the pool with Chris came back to her. Why hadn't he trained her? It now seemed ridiculous that they had spent all that time together in the pool, and they'd talked about so much, yet they couldn't be bothered with First Aid or CPR. She was in trouble now, she knew, and she felt that shimmering indestructibility fall away from her like a cloak. She looked out the window at the house she said was hers. She would have to walk a few blocks still.

“Why don't we talk about it in my office tomorrow?”

“Okay,” Liz said.

“Okay.”

“The door is still locked.”

“You have to mess with it a little.” He reached over and rattled the lock, then took his hand back, letting it brush across her thighs.

Liz flashed a look at him. His hand now rested on the center console, but she could feel him staring at her. His wooden sandals were on the dashboard. His bare feet were smooth, uncalloused, which surprised her. She could see the toenails, white teeth against the tanned skin, and the paler strip where the thong of his sandals guarded against the sun. Oh, fuck it, she thought, and put her hand on his.

\*\*\*

A few summer days dripped on. Audrey spent most of her time in the snack bar writing out questions that came to her mind, questions she would ask if there were ever a lull in conversation. In a drawer behind the front desk she found a worn square textbook called *Anatomy of the Sea*—“over 600 creatures of the deep.” She studied the pictures of

sea pens and jellyfish, memorized their Latin nomenclature. She had also brought the records to the pool and put them in her locker, hoping Liz would spot them and some part of her brain—the part that wanted to be friends with Audrey—would click back on. She didn't know how Liz would react, or even if she would. Why on earth would Audrey keep records in her locker anyway? She knew the notion was hard to approach. The records, her list of questions, *Anatomy of the Sea*—Audrey was putting all her faith in the mystery of these things. Her idea, now, was not to change wholesale, but to prepare circumstances that would make others want to know more about her.

Some of the staff returned to school early, leaving Audrey, Liz and Chris with more duties. They performed all the opening and closing tasks together, which had become increasingly problematic. Chris and Liz were tense. Right before closing time, a strong wind picked up and blew leaves and pine needles all across the pool and deck area. Chris and Liz swept the deck, while Audrey used the net to scoop debris out of the water.

Mr. Larsen had not returned to the pool since his son's accident. Kyle was still in the hospital, and it was well known that his condition was somewhat uncertain. But whenever Audrey asked those she thought would have more information—Wallace, her parents, any other adult—they only said, "He'll be okay." This worried her more.

"I heard he was in a coma," Chris said. "Paralyzed from the neck down."

"Is that true?" Audrey said.

"No doubt," he said. "Heard Larsen might sue."

"Oh, really?" Liz said. "For what possible reason?"

"Slippage."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

“That diving board is a decaying piece of shit. Wallace is too cheap to invest in a new one.”

“It’s not up to him,” Liz said.

“How would you know?” Chris said. “You know something?”

Liz lifted her sunglasses and glared at him. She shook her head.

“You don’t know a whole lot, do you?” he said.

“Shut up, Chris.”

“About Kyle, though,” Audrey said. She wielded the net awkwardly, struggling to scoop a wide leaf.

“Like I said, paralyzed from the neck down. Probably doesn’t have much of a chance.”

“Don’t listen to him, Audrey. He’s full of shit.”

Chris swept in short, quick bursts. “If you know something, just say it.”

\*\*\*

The next morning, Audrey reeled in the robotic pool cleaner—the Dolphin Dynamic DX5—and rolled it into a corner near the backwashing shed. Chris came up behind her holding a flashlight and a plastic bag filled with little vials.

“There she is,” he said. “Listen, sorry about yesterday. I was being a jerk.”

“You weren’t.”

“I was, and I wanted to make it up to you.” He grabbed her hand. “Come with me,” he said, tugging toward the shed.

“Where are we going?”

“We’re going to solve the wasp dilemma.”

The light was still out in the shed. A soft buzzing filled the air. “What are we doing?” Audrey said.

“I’ve been trying to keep them in check, but they always come back. It’s not enough to get the ones in the nest, so I’m going to bomb this place with insecticide.” He took out the vials and handed her one. “Bug grenades. Homemade.”

Audrey wanted to give back the vial, afraid it might explode in her hand. “You made these?”

“I’m sort of an inventor. Sort of.” He gathered the vials in his arms and handed her a few more. “We’ve got to do this fast. They’ll get angry after the first ones explode.” He explained what to do—pull the pin and roll the vials in all directions. “Ready?” he said.

“I don’t know.”

“Go!”

Chris began pulling pins and rolling vials, but Audrey’s stuck. Finally she threw all the vials toward the back wall without pulling the pins, hoping Chris’s might set hers off, too, and he wouldn’t know she had failed.

But none of the vials exploded. A yellow liquid fizzed and spewed out of the tops, then stopped. A few wasps landed in the liquid, then flew lazily away.

“Mother fuck,” Chris said. “The insecticide must’ve diffused the bombs.”

Audrey laughed. “It was a good idea.”

“It didn’t work. I should’ve tested it out. I feel stupid.” He put his hands in his face.

“It’s no big deal,” she said. She thought he was being childish.

A wasp floated by her shoulder, and Chris swatted it away. He looked at her. She felt he might be about to do something dramatic—cry or kiss her or something, which filled her with panic. She was already uncomfortable around Chris—she never knew what to say to him—and seeing him cry would be too much, though a romantic gesture might have been worse. She had imagined physical encounters with boys, but she could not imagine a scenario in which the necessary progressions went smoothly.

The look Chris gave her then, it seemed to contain both unwillingness and an acceptance that the next thing, whatever it was, must be done. Audrey wanted to run away.

She said, “Did you know that only young fertilized queen wasps will survive the winter?”

Chris laughed. “So wait it out, then?”

“Yes. Exactly.”

He shook his head and looked at the vial he still held. “These things will be off limits now. He’ll make me write it on the board. Like I’d ever try this again.”

Later Audrey found a note on top of the crate of records in her locker. It read, “Sorry about today. Meet me at the pool tonight? Chris.” Above the writing was a storm cloud of gray eraser smudges, in which Audrey wrote “Yes,” and slipped the paper into Chris’s locker.

\*\*\*

In the hospital waiting room after work, Mr. Larsen asked Audrey how her arms got better so quickly.

“I don’t know,” she said. Her mother had rubbed calamine lotion and a deodorant containing aluminum on them and kept her on a responsible aspirin schedule, which seemed like too much of an explanation. “They just healed themselves.”

“Healed themselves,” Larsen said, nodding.

Audrey had decided, finally, to see for herself about Kyle, but now that she was talking to Larsen, she felt out of place, intruding, and also that what happened to Kyle was all her fault, that he wouldn’t have been on the diving board in the rain if she hadn’t first sat down next to him.

She had imagined she could just ask a receptionist which room he was in and go from there, but Larsen called out her name, like he did to everyone at the pool. He introduced her to Mrs. Larsen, who was also there.

“Do you know Kyle from school?” Mrs. Larsen said. She was very pale and did not wear makeup. She sat across from Audrey, next to her husband, and kept twisting the strands of black hair that fell from her temples. She twirled the hair around her finger until it made a knot, then she slipped her finger loose, pulling a few hairs away each time.

“No, I met him at the pool. I work there.”

“Oh, how nice.”

“How is he?” Audrey said.

“They keep giving us information in bits, here and there,” Mrs. Larsen said. “He was out when they first brought him here. He had a sprained neck and concussion, water in his lungs still. He’s in recovery now, so they tell us everything should be fine as long as there are no complications.” She laughed, a short, huffing laugh that made Audrey



uncomfortable. “They always have to leave some room for themselves, though, don’t they?”

“Would anyone like some coffee?” Mr. Larsen said. “Audrey, coffee? How about *I serve you* for a change?”

“I’ll have just a little. Thank you,” Audrey said.

“Complications,” Mrs. Larsen said when her husband had left. She pulled a few more strands loose and dropped them to the floor, where a sparse nest of hair had accumulated.

“I’m sure there won’t be any complications,” Audrey said.

Mrs. Larsen nodded and patted Audrey’s knee. “You’re probably right.”

Mr. Larsen returned with the coffee, pinching the rims of both Styrofoam cups between his thumb and index finger. He handed one to Audrey. “How do you like that?” he said to her, laughing. “For once, me serving you.”

“You said that already, dear.”

“Right, right.”

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The golf course was themed around Japanese culture. Wallace and his wife had taken a trip to Japan during the last year of her life, and he’d been calmed by the potential for silence and reflection at almost any place and time. He had arranged to play a nearby golf course but was disappointed to find it resembled many American courses he’d played, with its sloping fairways and belts of dark green trees. His own course had experienced drops in attendance, and when the board asked for solutions, he came to them with koi ponds, rock gardens, bamboo, cherry trees, buddhas. They went for it, but

he had made errors in calculating costs, and now he was on a kind of probation, relegated to strictly pool management, while they tried to adjust their books and stretch what koi and rocks and buddhas they had across eighteen holes and a Par 3 course.

Wallace had taken a few of the smaller buddhas and arranged them in his office. He also took one of the koi, a large silver one with splotches of red along its body and a perfect red mask. He kept the koi in an aquarium against the window that looked out to the pool. Children often stopped by the window to gaze at the fish as it wove leisurely through the long algae, and Wallace could comfortably stand at the window and stare at the sunbathers without drawing suspicion: it appeared he was watching his fish.

When the koi died, he knew he had done something wrong—gotten too weak a filter or too small an aquarium, overfed it, let too much sunlight in, something—but he did not make adjustments. He simply replaced the dead fish with a similar one from the golf course. Now, though, he kept one of the lifeguard rescue boards over the aquarium to discourage jumping.

Dusk fell. Wallace loomed over the aquarium, tapping a few flakes of fish food into the koi's open mouth and watching the last shadows creep over the pool deck.

He had made a move on Liz, or she had made a move on him. He wasn't exactly sure how it had started. They had gone back to his office and he put on a record, but it was warped. He hadn't used his portable player in a long time, so he wasn't surprised. It was just unpleasant, and they had to stop and take the needle off. He'd noticed a box of records in the snack girl's locker and thought he would take a few of hers for later. That was lucky, having the records. The music drowned out other sounds. He wanted this, and he suspected from the way her legs gave that she wasn't all that unhappy about it either.

What he didn't want was for it to turn into a predatory thing; he felt he was too noble for that. He'd told her to meet him in his office later tonight, and there he would sort her out. She needed to know the facts, the circumstances. She didn't know, for instance, that he'd been married and his wife had died after a drawn-out illness, many years ago, and now he ate most of his meals in the last rows of theaters. That alone would clear things up, he thought. He could persuade her.

Hopeful, Wallace plucked his six-iron from its holder. He walked along the edge of the pool toward the green, letting the head of the club slice the water's surface. Once he was through the gate and back on the course, he teed the ball in the tough korai, the manilagrass collar around the creeping bentgrass of the green, and set himself, padding his bare feet, the light sensation coursing through his legs like water through a pipe. Since his wife's passing, he had only ever desired this feeling, but it was wrenched from him. Standing there in the cool dark, he hooked golf balls toward the shingled pool house roof, the lighted white clock face overlooking the pool, the trees, the backwashing shed—and at that last, he paused and listened for the dead thump of the ball striking water.

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That night, Audrey arrived at the pool early. She had no idea what might happen during this meeting with Chris. She was nervous, and she wanted any advantage she could manufacture. She would sit near the snack bar, believing the familiarity might calm her.

The front gate was already unlocked, and Audrey let out a short, panicky "Oh." She looked around, as if someone was following her. It was a noisy summer night, the

crickets and frogs screeching at each other. She was more afraid of turning back now, so she slipped through the gate quickly.

The whole place was dark. She walked across the deck, knocking a few chairs before her eyes could adjust, then made her way around the pool, looking for Chris, whispering his name.

As she neared the backwashing shed, a voice said, "Hello?"

"Liz?"

"Audrey!" Liz sat just inside the shed, her back against one of the bulbous tanks, holding a flashlight. "What are you doing here?"

"I left something."

"The records?"

"Yes," Audrey said, relieved. "What are you doing here?"

Liz waved the flashlight vaguely. "The pool is nice at night."

"Yeah," Audrey said, and meant it. The cool dry air, the darkness, the moonlight—the way it concentrated in one reassuring line across the water—all had a soothing effect on Audrey. Even Liz's presence lifted her spirits.

Liz lighted a cigarette, offered one to Audrey, who took it, rolled the thin white tube between her fingers until she saw the script on the filter.

"Shit, that was my last match. Here." Liz placed the cigarette on Audrey's lips and pulled her in. The ends touched, Audrey inhaled and watched the tip smolder.

"Voila," Liz said, leaning back against the large, humming machine. She sighed and told Audrey to rest her head on the machine, too. "That low-grade vibration," she said, "it feels so good."

Liz closed her eyes and blew a stream of smoke. Audrey watched as she moved her lower jaw back and forth, a leftover tic from her mouth gear days.

“Matches?” Audrey said.

“Yeah, I don’t know. It’s dumb,” she said. “I don’t know why I do the things I do.” She stretched her legs and massaged the inside of her thighs. “I really fucked this one up. I’m quitting. I’m going to tell Wallace.”

“Because of Kyle?”

Liz clicked the flashlight on and off. “No, it’s not that.”

“Chris?”

“Hey, Audrey.” Liz flashed the light into Audrey’s face.

“Yeah?”

“I’m trying to enjoy the vibrations.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Audrey worried about the wasps. She could hear their soft rustlings and hoped it meant they were settling in for the night.

Then Liz said, “Want to see something?”

“Sure.”

Liz led Audrey out toward the pool, flicking her cigarette over the fence onto the golf course. Audrey had only taken two short drags, but she already felt a queasy buzz, so she tossed her cigarette over the fence, too.

The pool was dark. As they came upon it, Audrey could see a thin, black mass of debris floating along the edges, toward the filters.

“Here,” Liz said, lifting the cover off one of the wall skimmers. She shined her light inside.

Audrey cringed. Inside the filter were two frogs and a rat, dead.

“I’ve never seen a rat in there before,” Liz said. “The rat’s new. Cool, right?”

“I guess.”

Liz shook her head. “Sorry, I thought you might like it. I liked how it made me feel when Chris showed me. I liked knowing things about the pool, things the people in the chairs didn’t know, or didn’t want to know. I think I’ll miss this. This feeling.”

“It doesn’t feel so good to me,” Audrey said.

“Maybe it will tomorrow. Think about it tomorrow when you’re in the snack bar making your hundredth grilled cheese of the day.” Liz replaced the lid, then said, “I’d like to go for one last swim. Join me?”

Audrey changed into a one-piece she kept in her locker. When she returned, the pool lights were on, the water glowing a jeweled turquoise. The Dolphin Dynamic DX5 roamed in the deep end, its cord slipping further into the water. “Pretty,” Audrey said.

Liz glided along the rope that separated the deep and shallow ends. She wore her lifeguard suit, a Navy blue two-piece. Audrey descended the steps slowly, holding the rail.

“Whoa, whoa,” Liz said. “No walking in the shallow end. Pool rules.”

“No paper products,” Audrey said, drifting into the water.

“No kimonos in the pool.”

“No swimming in the pool.”

The girls laughed as they swam toward the deep end, the water cool without the accumulated sweat and warmth of other bodies.

Audrey said, "Watch this." She dove under, righted herself under the side ladder and stuck her nose and mouth below one of the rungs, where a pocket of air allowed her to breathe for about a minute. She felt a tap on her shoulder and surfaced.

"What were you doing?" Liz said.

"Breathing under water. Look."

She went under again, thinking Liz would follow.

"Okay, that's enough," Liz said after Audrey had come up the second time.

Audrey sensed Liz drawing back and thought, Slow down, take it easy, pace yourself. She looked down and noticed something round and white below them. She went under again and snatched the golf ball. "Someone's a bad shot," she said.

"Leave it."

Audrey dropped the ball and watched it sink.

"I need another cigarette," Liz said.

"I have to go to the bathroom."

"You can go in here. I don't mind. I'll swim to the shallow end."

"I'd rather not." Audrey climbed the ladder and wrung her hair. She shivered, suddenly cold in the open.

"Hey," Liz called, "I think there's Scotch or something in my locker. We have the pool to ourselves. Let's not waste it."

Audrey smiled and said, "Okay."

She found the bottle wrapped in a white cotton t-shirt stuffed in the corner of Liz's locker. The cap and part of the brown neck poked through, so that it looked like a long-necked animal clothed in swaddling. She eased the locker shut so the latch clicked

softly, and as she stood she heard the faint crackle of a needle meeting vinyl. Soon there was the tap-tap of a snare drum, a flourish of piano keys. Audrey listened. She had heard this song dozens of times. She opened her own locker and saw that a few records were missing from the crate. Had Liz taken them while she was in the bathroom? And she had made a choice, a choice of which one to play. The notion of decision made Audrey feel an inordinate closeness to Liz. They had listened together. They had danced to it, danced through the night, forgetting their cocktails, their questions, letting the dance provide what they needed. “Here,” Liz used to say. “Like this.” She would twist her hips, jump in place, shake and flail, shimmy and slide, grab Audrey’s arms and spin her around, spin herself around until they both fell, dizzy. How good this music still sounded! Audrey rushed out of the locker room, half-expecting to see Liz dancing on the diving board, but when she got to the deck, the pool lights were out, everything was dark, and she could just barely see Liz huddled on one of the corner chairs, knees against her chest, struggling to wrap a towel all the way around her legs.



## DON'T TELL ME

I've been taking more pictures lately, mostly of Mineral Water, my Dalmatian, because he's getting old and I want to remember him when I'm old, too. I use the standard digital picture-taking devices, but I also have this wonderful old Polaroid. It takes five or seven minutes to compose a marbled picture, and when they finally come out they look like they've been recovered from a fire. I take them of Mineral Water lying in the sun, or standing in the bed of my truck, waiting for me to release the gate. On the white strip at the bottom I write "Mineral Water, July 2013," or whatever, and when someone new came over, a guy from work or a girl, maybe, it was the same story. "What's this title?" they would say. "Mineral water? I don't see it."

The glassy Polaroid streaks and smudges could resemble water stains, and sometimes it was like you were looking at the picture through a film of water. I remember a girl I used to date, Chloe, the one who named the dog, liked to drive around in the rain without the wipers on, see how far she could go before the image in front of her became too bleary and distorted and she had to flip on the blades. Usually this was on a back road and there were no cars, but there might have been a raccoon, or a sudden dog. Fat droplets slapped at the windshield, but the funny thing was we could see pretty well for a long time. As more and more fell, it congealed so that it was like looking through a film of clear ice. "I feel like a fish in an aquarium," she'd say, smiling at me, then throw the switch, clearing the slab of water. This was back when Minnie, as Chloe liked to call him, was solely her dog, back when we were just playing at a real relationship, the way you play a new game, slowly but excitedly, learning the rules and the different ways to break them.

Chloe's vet, Deena, told me Mineral Water should be put down. This was outside in the patch of fading grass most of the dogs around Chloe's apartment used as a toilet. We'd been talking about the different classifications of dogs, and she told me that Mineral Water—six years old at the time Chloe adopted him, just after her mother died—was a level three protection dog, that he was very beautiful, and that I should tell Chloe he needed to be humanely destroyed. Those were her words. Deena was Minnie's vet, and she also lived in the same apartment complex as Chloe.

“Why?” I said.

“He's deaf. Over ten percent of the Dalmatian breed is deaf. We don't want that number to rise.” She wore a tight, short sleeve green and black bicycling suit, though it was cool, early October, bright yellow leaves falling from the maples that lined the complex gates. I'd seen her around many times, and she never wore anything else.

“He's fixed.”

“He lives an unhappy life, Tom,” she said. I must have looked offended, though I didn't feel it, because she added, “They usually become too aggressive, and many of them get hit by cars. Look.” Mineral Water had pulled the leash taut trying to get closer to Scarlett, Deena's old, old greyhound, who hid behind her big legs.

“He just wants to play. He means well.”

“It's Chloe's call. Talk to her about it. I can take care of it, if she wants.”

“She planned on bathing him today. She wants his nails trimmed.”

Deena smiled. “I can take care of that too.” She walked away with a hulking monster's stride, made more ridiculous by her cycling getup, her shoulders bunched high and her bowed legs a little too far apart. Some painters painting the side of the building

gathered near the stairwell on break now. They ate green apples and tried to pet Scarlett, but she moved to the other side of Deena as they passed.

Chloe told me that Deena had dressed up as a professional road bicycle racer for Halloween last year, and after, seeing as she already bought the clothing and gear, she took up cycling. Chloe saw her riding a few times, but that soon ended. She still wore the gear, but she'd gotten fatter, and sometimes a ring of flesh showed around her waist.

Chloe and I had been dating awhile and I'd almost completely moved in with her. We were fresh out of college, and I was still jobless and technically living with my parents, but I was embarrassed about that so I hung around Chloe's apartment a lot, slept over most nights. She had landed a desk job in sales and support for an engineering technology firm, and with that, it seemed she had become a more fully formed person. She wore a blazer and heels to work, came home exhausted every day and changed immediately into shorts and a tank top, poured a glass of wine, sank into the couch, looked at me and said, "What have you been up to?" Everything I did felt stumbling and inadequate, and I thought she felt it, too. If she did, she tried not to show it. She had a small face framed by straight black hair that came down to her shoulders. She never wore long pants around me because I had once told her I liked the shape of her calves, and she was more pleasant when she drank than anyone I'd ever known, and so I thought that I might love her.

Later that evening, while I waited for Chloe to get back from work I searched for information about deaf Dalmatians. It was true. The common position was anti-deaf dog. If you ran a pet shop, you were urged not to sell deaf Dalmatians. If you were affiliated with an animal shelter, you were urged not to place deaf Dalmatians in permanent homes.

If you owned one of these deaf dogs, you were urged not to feel guilty about handling it properly, and to consider “starting over” with a different dog.

But Mineral Water *was* Chloe’s new start, in a way. Her mother had hung herself just a month before. Chloe hadn’t been close to her parents since she left home for college, so she claimed to have gotten over it quickly. Still, a few weeks later I showed up at her apartment, and there was Mineral Water, gaunt and tired-looking. Immediately I tried to picture him sitting on top of an old fire truck, but I just couldn’t place him. The apartment smelled of piss and odor neutralizer. “He’s a rescue, and he’s deaf,” she’d said. “I felt sorry for him. Isn’t he beautiful? I’m going to learn how to sign commands to him. I’m on ‘sit.’” She flitted her hands in front of the dog’s face, but he didn’t move, so she tried again more slowly. I snapped my fingers near one of his ears, and she slapped my hand away.

I looked at him now. He lay on the tile in the kitchen. A train blared its horn outside, and Mineral Water lifted his head as it rumbled past.

Chloe called and said she was almost home and wanted to bathe the dog right when she got back, so I turned the water on and spread a larger towel out beside the tub.

We got him in after a small struggle, and I told her what Deena said.

“I know,” Chloe said, cupping water onto his back. “She mentioned it when I first took him in last week.”

“Oh. And the shelter?”

“They said I couldn’t have him. I had to beg.”

I lathered shampoo into my hands and worked it into his chest and shoulders.

“Deena said they are likely to get hurt because they can’t hear what’s coming. She said a lot of them get hit by cars.”

“And you’re worried about that?”

“No, about you,” I said. “You might be setting yourself up.”

“You know,” she said, “it’s good to lose sometimes. People need to lose. It makes you feel smaller but also somehow bigger, out of proportion with the rest of the world.” She knew I couldn’t relate. She had that on me, too. She had loss on me. “Anyway,” she continued, “Scarlett is blind and has a cast on a different leg every week. What’s the difference?”

Her phone rang in the other room and she got up, dried off her hands and went to answer it. Soon she came back.

“Who was it?”

“Guy from work,” she said. “He wanted to know if I was working this weekend.”

“James?” I said, and she nodded.

James was another young hire at Chloe’s firm. Sometimes she went out for drinks with him and a few other coworkers. I went along once and did a lot of listening. The two of them got up together at one point—him to get another round and her to use the restroom—and through the crowd I saw him put his hand on the small of her back. Maybe it was nothing. I never brought it up, didn’t think she needed me on her back after everything with her mom, but I decided not to go out with them anymore.

“We should take a trip, go to the beach,” I said. I’d been trying to get her to go somewhere ever since her mother died. The beach seemed a safe bet because we’d been

once before and she liked it. We lucked out with perfect weather, set up our lawn chairs away from the crowd, took turns rubbing lotion on each other and then sat back with big glasses of rum and coke and a couple of lime slices mixed in among the ice. A kid came around with a bucket of oysters and offered to shuck some for us, a quarter apiece. We asked for four and I gave him three bucks. We slurped the oysters and washed them down with the rum. Soon we were tipsy and drowsy from the sun, and Chloe began nodding off as a few kids started digging a large hole nearby. One paced with his hands on his hips, looking nervous. “They’re going to bury him,” Chloe said, her head on my shoulder. The kids gave up and went into the water wearing big snorkeling goggles, but a little while later, Chloe suddenly said, “Oh my god, what will they do?” She’d fallen asleep and thought they had dug too far for too long, and wouldn’t be able to get out.

Something like the beach, I thought, would help. I would’ve done anything, but she was resistant.

“You have no money, and I don’t need to spend,” she said. She stood behind me while I dumped water on the dog and smoothed shampoo out of his slick coat. I imagined her arms were folded.

“We’ll go somewhere cheap. One night, maybe. Or just for the day.”

“We’d have to bring the dog along. A deaf dog at the beach is more trouble than it’s worth.”

“I’m just trying to help,” I said, turning my head. “All I want to do is help.”

“That’s what the dog is for.”

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I stayed with the dog the whole time Chloe was at work the next day, decided not to go home. After feeding him in the morning, I waited till he lay down, then I grabbed my keys and stood behind him and jangled them above his head. He didn't move. I found a toy that made a squeaking noise and squeezed it behind his ear. Some air escaped, making his ear twitch, but otherwise, nothing. I set the microwave timer to three minutes, plugged in the vacuum, banged some pots together and whistled as loud as I could. I cut the vacuum and the microwave and heard him snoring.

In a little while, I held some cheese in front of his nose to wake him up gently—I'd learned some things while researching the day before. We went downstairs and walked around the complex for a while. The air was warm and still. No one was out. He sniffed around the leaves, then I heard a soft purring nearby. An orange tabby stuck its head out from under a pickup truck. It had no collar and its fur looked matted and dirty. It was purring at Minnie, looking right at him. He kept sniffing through the leaves, oblivious. The cat emerged from under the truck and began to approach us, stalked close by, and then a wind picked up and shuffled some of the leaves around. Mineral Water darted after a few, turned and was startled by the cat. He jumped back, then lunged at it, snapping. I pulled on the leash, but the cat wouldn't leave us, so I reached for Minnie's collar. He whipped around and bit hard into my hand, and I cursed and pulled it back. He'd taken a chunk out of the webbing between my thumb and forefinger. The cat scurried away.

I made a bandage of toilet paper and searched around for something to secure it, found a rubber band in a box of old junk. Mineral Water sniffed around the box and watched me fix the rubber band. "We're going to make this work," I said. I put my hands

on his shoulders, stared hard into his face, thinking that maybe if I forced myself onto his other senses, he would get used to me. I found the American Sign Language pocketbook Chloe had bought and learned the signs for a few simple commands. He picked up “sit” quickly, since Chloe had already started teaching him. I learned to get his attention by stomping on the floor and waving.

We did that awhile and then rested. He climbed onto the couch beside me and put his head in my lap. “Good boy,” I said. It was cold in the apartment and the pumpkins and skeleton decorations made it seem colder. I turned on the Cardinals game, top of the fourth, still early. Baseball in the middle of the day had always been lightly sedating, and I fell asleep with the sun warming my face through square windows.

I woke up to the crowd cheering in the bottom of the eighth, and saw on the floor in front of me a half-destroyed Kodak camera that I recognized from the junk box, chewed up black pieces scattered around the carpet, and Mineral Water lying in the kitchen, panting heavily. I rushed to the fridge and found Deena’s apartment number, but I remembered that she would be at work, so I looked under another magnet and found the vet’s address, scooped up the dog and rushed out of the apartment.

“He’s so precious! He looks so healthy!” Deena said to Mineral Water once he was in the back room. Her face beamed close to his, and he wagged his tail. Then to me, she said, “What’s wrong with you?” She was wearing a white coat over light blue scrubs. It was the first time I’d seen her wear anything other than that cycling outfit, and different clothes on her had a charming effect, like a French accent coming from any other woman.

“It was an accident,” I said.

“Tell me exactly what happened.”



I told her.

“He probably only pulled off the casing and chewed it up. You should’ve brought the camera. If you want, I can take a look at it later, but I don’t think we should be alarmed if he just swallowed a few bits of plastic.” She looked at my bandaged hand.

“What happened to you?”

I glanced at the dog. “Another accident.”

She shook her head. “You know what I think about it.”

When I returned to the apartment, Chloe was standing with a glass of wine in hand, phone in the other, upset, strikingly and self-consciously grown-up.

“I just tried to call you,” she said. “Why did I come home to an unlocked door and a missing dog?”

“Was anything stolen?”

“No, but someone must have been here because this camera is all smashed up.”

“Oh, no, Mineral Water ate that. I took him to the vet.”

She went into a rage. In addition to my being irresponsible, Chloe emphasized my lack of employment and ambition and questioned my commitment. If I couldn’t even watch a dog for a few hours, how could I be trusted in a long-term relationship?

“I’ve barely had him a week and you’re already screwing it up,” she said.

“Deena said he’s fine. She said it’s nothing to worry about.”

The dog lay down beside her, sighed deeply, and began licking at her feet. Chloe, still looking at me, one arm across her stomach, turned up a heel to give him a better angle.

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That night I woke up to the clunk of ice falling in the freezer. Mineral Water was sleeping on the floor, but Chloe wasn't in bed. I got up and stepped over the dog on my way out. Chloe stood in the middle of the living room, holding a garbage bag, looking around. A glass of whiskey and ice sat on a soaked napkin on the coffee table.

"I couldn't sleep," she said when she saw me.

I fixed a drink for myself. "Why are you standing here in the living room?" I said.

"I don't like any of this," she said.

"Any of what?"

She looked at me quickly, then turned back to the room. "This." She picked up a swirling pink picture frame and tossed it in the garbage bag. "And this, and this, and this." She picked up more things—copies of *People*, a lamp with perfect shells glued to its side—and put them in the bag.

"Let's go back to bed," I said. I finished my drink and emptied the ice into the sink, then did the same with hers. I took her arm.

"Wait," she said. "Just wait."

The next day, I bought a small bell to put around his neck and a tag inscribed with "This dog is deaf" and Chloe's phone number. "For if he ever gets away. And the bell is so I don't fall asleep around him," I joked.

"That will get annoying," she said.

I started then to spoil the dog when Chloe was away. I slipped him string cheese, honey and wheat pretzels, bits of banana, let him lick the insides of empty yogurt containers. I kept a bag of chips with me and broke off pieces to feed him periodically. I made it so that he never left my side. I took him on longer walks, explored the areas

around the other buildings in the complex, delighted in the different Halloween decorations, looked into people's windows. I was curious. Just passing glances, but I noted what I saw, and I was drawn to one apartment that seemed immaculately decorated, but I'd never once seen a person inside. One breezy day, the coldest yet of the fall—deeper into October now, the leaves all but off the branches, but for the frost on the ground and around the edges of windows, it could have been mid-January—I stopped in front of that apartment and got right up to the window, much closer than I should have. The kitchen lights were on, but there was no sign of anyone. Nothing was out of place.

“That’s a model, you know.” It was Deena.

“I know,” I said, startled. “I just wondered what it looked like. You know, how they decided to decorate it compared to Chloe.”

Over her cycling suit she wore a black jacket, with reflective strips and mesh panels under the arms. She surprised me by offering me a job at the clinic.

“I’m not great with animals,” I said.

“How good are you with a mop?”

“Worse.”

She smiled and zipped up her neck guard. “Well, it’s yours anyway, if you want it. I talked to Chloe. I felt bad about telling her to put her dog down.”

So they’d talked. Deena knew about Chloe’s mother, probably. And she knew something about me. What all did she know about me? I wondered.

My shift started after the clinic closed every day. I mopped floors, Windexed the windows, cleaned the kennels, fed and looked after the animals that stayed overnight. The tasks were simple, but it felt good to do something, to check things off a list. I started

missing Chloe and the dog. I left for work about the same time Chloe got home, so I saw less and less of her. I might've felt lonely if it weren't for the animals, some of which I let out of the cages while I worked, and for Deena, who often stayed late doing this or that. She brought Scarlett to the clinic with her, so she could stay as long as she wanted. She played chamber music over the PA system, claiming the animals liked it. A couple days in, I found out that Deena made up stories for the animals. She gave them histories, jobs, interests, hobbies, idiosyncrasies, and she involved them all in soap-opera plotlines.

“That Siamese murdered that German shepherd's father, and then slept with his mother,” she said. “It's all very dramatic, and impossible.”

“And they're sick too,” I said, not really thinking. I was mopping the floors near the cages.

“Yes, they are. Many of them are very sick.” Her expression went serious.

“I just meant like in the soaps,” I said.

“I know, I didn't mean to get sullen.”

She asked about Chloe, and I said she was doing all right, considering, but that I didn't know what she thought of me anymore. Deena nodded.

“I think she might be seeing someone from work,” I said. “Do you know anything about that?”

She smiled and, in her clinical voice, said, “No, but I'm sure there's nothing to worry about.”

I nodded and went back to mopping.

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Something was happening. Chloe started taking Mineral Water to training classes. She seemed to be taking more of an interest in the dog, and I thought at first that he was really helping her.

She took him almost every night after work. I would spend the day with the dog, but I would leave for work before Chloe got back. She would take the dog to training around 8 at night, and usually she told me she was too tired to do anything after, so I should go back to my parents' when I got off work instead of going to her apartment. We talked less and less, and soon a week went by and I hadn't seen her at all. I tried calling her, but her responses were short and vague. During the days, when I was with Mineral Water, I searched her apartment for some sign—a sock that wasn't mine, the radio tuned to a station neither of us listened to.

Finally, on Halloween, she called me and said, "I have something to show you."

It was long past dark when I drove to her apartment after work. I passed through a residential neighborhood and saw that kids were already out trick-or-treating. A house had been wrapped in toilet paper, the white sheets hanging from the trees, swaying. I ended up behind a truck whose bed was full of kids sitting on haystacks. They all shouted "Boo" at me until I turned.

I didn't know what to expect when I got to Chloe's apartment, but when I arrived she sat me on the couch and told me to wait. She went into her bedroom and came back out with Minnie, an inflatable ring around his waist and sunglasses over his snout. He darted toward me and jumped on the couch.

“Wait, hold on,” Chloe said. She waved and stomped her feet trying to get him back down. She signed something that I didn’t know, but Mineral Water just looked at her, unblinking.

“Fuck. I had this whole thing worked out. He won’t do it.”

“What are you trying to sign?”

“Something like ‘where’s the beach,’ only you’re the beach. He’s supposed to go to you.”

“He did it, then. Right?”

“He’s doing it wrong,” she said. “I had this whole thing planned.”

He kept sniffing around my pockets, where I usually kept the bag of chips. “He’s just excited.”

“He likes you more than he likes me,” she said and sat down.

“I’ve been spoiling him. That’s the reason.”

“No, it’s been this way from the beginning.” She sighed and looked away, then got up and went to her room. She came out in different clothes, a black dress and leggings. She picked her coat off the rack near the door.

“Where are you going?” I said.

“Work party.”

“You never mentioned a work party tonight.”

“I didn’t think I would go. Now I think I will.”

“I’ll come too,” I said.

“No, you stay.” She put on her coat and added, “Have some alone time with the dog.”

She left. I stayed with the dog. I took off the tube and sunglasses. Something to do with the beach, I guessed. We played fetch with a shoe for a while, but he got tired, or bored, and finally trotted over to the shoe and, instead of bringing it back, plopped down on it. I waited a couple hours, thought about calling Chloe to apologize, but instead I called Deena and was surprised when she answered. “I forgot to empty the trash cans at the clinic. I just forgot, and then I just remembered, and I thought I should tell you.”

“That’s okay,” she said. “That’s no problem. Is that all you wanted?”

“Are you doing anything? It’s Halloween, and I have no plans.”

“I’m not doing anything. Dishes. And I have plans to try to get Scarlett to eat something. After that, I’m free. I could use some plans.”

“I’ll bring candy.”

“Great. Give me a few minutes.”

I put the phone down and Mineral Water was asleep at my feet, dreaming. His legs twitched and churned, like he was running, and I got this terrible feeling that he was running away from me. I bent to stroke his chest, nudged his shoulder, and he started awake. He looked confused and exhausted, all wrinkled brow and bloodshot eyes. I clicked on his leash and hoisted him up, surprised by his weight, more solid every day. Outside the cold was bracing, even in the building’s hallway. I carried the dog like a baby down the steps, his pretty blue eyes still misty with sleep, and didn’t set him down till I reached the grass. He went immediately, shaking in the cold, but now was fully awake, darting this way and that, ready to play, his bell ringing sharp and clear. The rest of the complex was alive, too. Parents were piling their witches and ghosts into their cars, taking them somewhere else to trick-or-treat.

I let Minnie take me around to a more secluded side of the building that adjoined a section of forest. We walked by a window that appeared dark until we passed directly in front of it. The blinds were up, and I could see that it was someone's bedroom, dimly lit from the bathroom light further back. I got up to the window and saw Deena standing in front of her bathroom mirror, shedding her cycling suit. She took off the green and black top, revealing a solid black spaghetti-strap top underneath. She had been wearing more clothes than I thought. She slipped the straps off her shoulders and stood staring. Her phone began moving on the counter by the sink, and she looked at it a moment before answering. Minnie brushed against my leg, darted after a leaf skirting across the blacktop but I jerked him back. He fussed with a beetle, whined, ready to go inside. I kept staring at Deena, her bare back and then her reflection in the mirror. She grabbed lumps, lifted rolls, pulled wrinkled skin tight around her breasts. It was thrilling, watching her, but I also felt an empty kind of dread.

Minnie started barking. I ducked away from the window, turned to see what upset him. I looked around. On the ground the leaves were still and looked dead in the pale moonlight. There was nothing else I could see. I thought it might be that cat, hiding under a car, but there was no purring.

I knelt down and put my hand on his shoulder. He jerked back, distrustful, still never certain what my hands were up to. "It's okay," I said. "There's nothing there." I stood up and we walked to Deena's apartment.

"Sorry, I was on the phone with my husband," she said when she opened the door. "Where's the candy?"

"Oh, *I'm* sorry. I forgot."



Minnie extended toward Scarlett, who stood behind Deena.

“I shouldn’t have brought him,” I said. I felt stupid.

“It’s okay,” Deena said. “Let’s set them up.”

The front door opened into the kitchen, with the living room beyond that and the bedroom to the right, just like Chloe’s apartment. Deena knifed some peanut butter into two conical toys and gave one to each of the dogs. They settled down near each other and went to work.

“That should keep them busy,” Deena said. “Wine?” She poured two glasses and handed me one. We moved out of the kitchen and into the living room. Her bedroom door was cracked, and I saw a pair of yellow shorts on her bed.

“I didn’t know you had a husband,” I said. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him around.”

“He doesn’t come around. We’re separated.”

I nodded. “How long?”

“Three years.” After a pause, she added, “Sometimes, you try your best to make a clean break. But it’s not easy.”

I sipped the wine and glanced into her bedroom again. She seemed lonely, and I thought I could sleep with her and make that better. That’s how I thought when I was twenty-two. I reached for her hand.

“Don’t,” she said. “I don’t want to.”

Headlights flashed outside her window. I heard car doors opening and closing, and then a second later Chloe’s laugh.

James had driven her home. The dog and I rounded the building and saw them walking away from his car. She was stumbling, had an arm around him for support, and he had an arm around her waist, both of them laughing. When she saw us, she broke away and rushed over, embracing the dog and then me.

“She had a good time,” James said, walking up to us. He had swooping blond hair and wore a long black coat. “A little too good. Thought it might be best to give her a ride home.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I let go of Minnie’s leash and he ran to James, his tail beating the air hard.

“There’s a good boy,” James said, bending down to pet the dog. He dribbled piss as he spun around in circles. I felt betrayed.

“See how good he is?” Chloe said to James. She looked at me. “Isn’t he a good dog?”

“The best,” I said.

“The absolute best,” James said, smiling wide.

Chloe thanked him for the ride and he left.

“I hear you had a good time,” I said.

Chloe squeezed my hand, smiled, rose up to kiss my cheek, and then I saw Deena and Scarlett walking towards us.

Minnie jumped and circled, and my heart jumped, too. I knelt to settle him and decided that I would simply let whatever happened happen. But when they got close, I saw that Deena had her phone to her ear, and all she said was, “Here’s Mineral Water! He looks so good! He’s so pretty! Yes he is!” And then softer, into the phone, she said,

“Mineral Water, yes. He’s a Dalmatian, and he’s so pretty! Oh yes, Scarlett’s here. She’s just being Scarlett, you know, just being her usual self, shying away.” They kept on, rounded a corner.

Chloe got down with us, pet the dog roughly, cooed at him. His handsomeness pleased her. “Everyone loves you,” she said. Then she took my hand and led us both around the complex.

We stopped as the dog engaged a baby frog, danced around it, sniffed and nuzzled it, flipped it on its back, and then we were moving again, passing the water station where a young couple, about our age, laughed and sprayed each other from opposite sides of their shining blue truck. “It’s so cold!” the woman said. “Don’t spray, don’t spray.”

Chloe laughed and flashed her eyes at me.

“I was in Deena’s apartment just now,” I said. “Something happened between us. Or almost did.”

“Don’t tell me about it,” she said. “I was happy before I came home. I wanted to be happy with you and you’re ruining it.”

“What’s going on between you and James?”

“Now you’ve ruined it,” she said, but kept holding my hand. “Come on. Let’s take a trip.”

We walked through the gates of the apartment complex, and I didn’t know how far she would take us. We were still on a quiet lane, and we came up on a group of boys in costumes playing baseball in a streetlamp’s cone of light. They’d given up the candy pursuit in favor of competitive sport.

“Let’s watch,” Chloe said.

A tiny Jedi pitched to a blue ninja, who missed a few times, and the Jedi began taunting him. The ninja threw the bat down and said he wanted to use a light saber, but the Jedi refused him. The other boys jeered into their gloves and finally it was decided that the batter would use a light saber after all. I looked over at Chloe. She was enjoying this. Her breathing steadied and I saw puffs of it condense in the air. I forgot I was holding the dog's leash, and when the ball made contact with the light saber, he darted after it, the leash sliding effortlessly from my fingers. Minnie got to the ball first and held it in his mouth. Then Chloe was after him, and the boys quit their complaining when she showed up. They finally got the ball from him, and they coaxed Chloe into taking a few swings. She missed badly, drunk as she was, and they all bent over laughing. I wish I could've taken a picture.

"Tom," she shouted. "Come show me how."

I went and put my arms around her, moved her hands lower on the bat. The boys stood still and watched us, amazed at the closeness of our bodies, our faces touching, so that I could feel the hard knot of her cheek as she smiled, and then her lashes playing on my face when she turned into me, and I thought, Maybe this won't be so bad. Maybe nothing will ever be so bad. And then, as sometimes happens on any street, anywhere, I was startled by the faint smell of cigarette smoke.

## CAREFUL

I steer clear of gatherings, meetings, get-togethers, parties, prefer to be alone, always have. I don't care what people think of me, not even my family. However, I don't like misunderstandings or surprises, so last fall, when my stepmother, Patricia, called and said we'd be holding a fish funeral that weekend, I nearly collapsed at the wheel.

I said, "Fish funeral? But Susan and I are halfway home." Susan, my best friend and roommate freshman year. Home from college. It was late already, almost dark, much later than I would have liked.

"I didn't mean you should turn around, Samantha," Patricia said. "I'm just letting you know."

I glanced at Susan in the passenger seat. She was smiling, intrigued. She wore a flowery blue sundress, her blonde hair pulled back and gathered in a ball at the back of her head, strands of it curled behind her ears. Dressed up to meet my family. I wore an old t-shirt and black yoga pants because it's a four-hour trip and I like to be comfortable when driving.

"Nothing has changed," my stepmother said. "There's just been an *addition*."

"Hold on." I pressed the phone against my chest. "This is not typical," I assured Susan, who was fake-crying, bent over, dabbing her cheeks with the skirt of her dress.

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My brother, Dustin, lay on the living room floor with one of his lizards, a sand-colored crested gecko. Dustin was twelve years old, a sensitive and trusting kid, freakishly tall for his age and extremely frail, forearms and wrists like pencils, easy to snap. He had no friends and was often bullied by the other junior-high kids, and to

compensate he had these animals, these low-maintenance fake friends. His room is a kind of air-conditioned jungle: he has a five-foot ball python, a tank of turtles, an assortment of fish that usually come and go without much pomp, one of those pretty zebra-faced macaws that he tried to take out of his room once, perched on his arm, but when it saw the high windows of our living room it fled and crashed against them, and I had to hold back Max, our black Labrador, until my father corralled the bird with a sheet from his bed.

The funeral for Wilbur, a common goldfish, wasn't until tomorrow, but for mourning purposes, Dustin wore black sweatpants, a large black undershirt, and a blackout curtain he'd draped over his shoulders and tied around his neck like a cape. I was regrettably certain he could not see that this outfit was also worthy of harsh junior-high ridicule.

Patricia was in the kitchen baking pretzels and washing dishes. My father was in the living room with the rest of us. He gave Susan and me beer to exhibit his coolness, I guess, but he undercut it by wearing the same sweater as Patricia, neon green cotton with "Hobson-Bensdorf Realtors," the name of their real estate firm, printed in block letters across the front, as obvious as if it had read "Be Happy" or "Sweater." My father and stepmother are about the same size and have similar shoulder-length brown hair swooped back off their foreheads and tucked behind their ears, so when they wore the same sweater, they looked almost like twins.

They were also, at the moment, in the process of moving to a bigger house in a less crowded neighborhood. They wanted to get more for their money. I disagreed with

this decision, explaining that with me out of the house now, they should downsize, eschew excess.

Due to the moving, the house was a mess, boxes everywhere, of course, half-filled with silverware, clothes, trinkets, baubles and gewgaws. Other junk lay about in piles that still needed sorting. The living room was a minefield of these piles, piles of dinosaur toys, piles of too-small clothes, piles of magazines. Dusty crates and plastic containers had been brought down from the attic and stacked in corners. On top of one of the stacks was the shoebox containing the dead fish, which was beginning to give off a faintly tangy scent. I apologized profusely to Susan.

“Dad, do you need help with some of this stuff?” I said.

“Absolutely not. You’re here to relax, so relax,” he said. He was sitting in his brown leather recliner, where he spent most of his time when he was home. At school, when I felt overwhelmed by the unceasing forward motion of my life, I take comfort in the good chance that my father is sitting in his leather recliner. It helps to be able to physically locate the people I know in my mind, and it’s easy to do with Dustin and Patricia and my father.

“Relax,” Susan said. “I’m relaxed.”

“Susan is relaxed,” Dad said. “She knows.”

I tried to relax, but it was hard with Dustin there on the floor, letting the gecko crawl over his body, puffing out laughs when it ventured to his armpit or licked at his neck.

“Dustin, can you reach this for me?” my stepmother called from the kitchen.

Dustin scooped the lizard in his hands and cupped it above his head. “Dad, take this.”

My father took the lizard, then Dustin rolled onto his stomach, tucked in one knee at a time, and lifted himself up from his elbows, about as quickly as I’ve ever seen him do it.

He scooted into the kitchen and grabbed from the cabinet what Patricia wanted, a rectangular serving tray, up so high because we never used it. He handed it to Patricia but let go too soon, and it shattered on the floor.

“Oh,” he said. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I apologize.” He bent over and pushed at the glass pieces.

“It’s okay,” Patricia said. She smiled, nudging him away from the glass. “I never liked it anyway.”

“Good. Get it out. No room here for stuff we don’t like,” my father said loudly from the top of the stairs, then walked the gecko to Dustin’s room.

Patricia served the pretzels on a snowman-shaped Christmas platter that she used for holiday decoration, never for actual food. Most of the decorations in the house were multifunctional and were not used for their original, implied purpose. Plates hung on walls, empty jugs and teacups lined a bookshelf, locked glass birdcages housed thick candles that went unlit. All of this was less obtrusive among the piles and boxes. Like the items in our home were new, straight from the factory, still trying to figure their places. At least, this was a nicer way of seeing that mess, and I hoped Susan saw it that way.

“Which side of the plate do you put the fork?” I asked Dustin. They had enrolled him in a cotillion class, which had possibly given him unrealistic expectations of female



interaction and which otherwise was, as my father reported, a colossal blunder. “He’s in a cotillion class, an ancient-manners class,” I said to Susan. “They teach pre-teens to eat with their mouths closed and dance the foxtrot.”

“The right,” Dustin said.

“Close,” Patricia said, setting down mismatched plates that she had just pulled from one of the moving boxes. “Very close.”

“I meant the left,” he said, exasperated. “And why do you want to know? We’re not using forks.”

“Have you met any nice girls at your class?” Susan said.

“He has a little friend, don’t you?” Patricia said.

“No, I do not.”

“Oh, sure. She’s cute,” Patricia said, winking.

I understood this to mean she was ugly, maybe even as stigmatized as Dustin.

Dustin said, “On the contrary.”

“He picked that up at Côte de León,” my father said. “He has quite the arsenal of phrases now.”

“On the contrary,” Dustin said, reaching for another pretzel.

“Wait a sec, Dustin,” I said. “We have a guest. Susan should get seconds first. Remember what you learned.”

“We didn’t learn that,” he said, but considered the pretzel a moment, then offered it to Susan.

“Oh, no thank you. That’s very polite. Thank you. I’m stuffed.”

He set the pretzel back onto the tray. “Me, too,” he said.

“Hey, here’s an idea. You tell me if this isn’t an idea,” Dad said. “Let’s play Kemps.”

“It’s an idea!” Dustin said.

“Kemps?” Susan said.

I explained the card game to Susan: like rummy, but with partners. Each team agrees on a secret sign before play begins, then everyone tries to get four of a kind. When you do, you give the secret sign to your partner, and he or she must yell “Kemps” to win the game. However, if the opposing team discovers your secret sign and yells “Kemps” before your partner, they win the round. If they are wrong about the secret sign and call “Kemps” when neither opposing player has four of a kind, they lose the round.

“Oh, you mean Corners,” Susan said.

“The four of you play. I’m better at watching,” Patricia said, though the four of us had already begun discussion of teams.

I insisted on being partners with Susan, but Dad wanted to draw names out of a hat and Susan and Dustin agreed, so that’s what we did.

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Dustin began flapping his arms, and Susan followed his lead. He shook his head, tapped his fingers and pounded his chest, bounced his knees, shrugged his shoulders, kept up some motion continuously, even when reaching for cards. He laughed the whole time, really enjoying himself. Susan, too.

“What the heck is this? A disco?” Dad said.

Of course, he knew what this was and knew their signal, we all knew it, only Susan didn’t know we knew. We’d all been on Dustin’s team before. It was his belief that

the constant motion would distract the other team, make them pay less attention in the long run, an elaborate setup for the signal. When he was your partner, when you got four of a kind, the signal was to stop, do nothing.

We played a few hands this way, Dad doing his best to lose, deliberately silent on all fronts; he would not speak up when I gave him our signal, which was to take the cards fanned in your hand and collapse them into one stack, and he would not speak up when Dustin or Susan stopped moving, which made me feel like a jerk when I did. I admit I was annoyed by their celebrations. Dustin would go wild, flail around, and hug Susan in a rocking embrace, exciting Max, who was always interested when two people got too close to each other.

“Oh my God,” Patricia said, looking out the kitchen window. “He’s doing it again! He’s doing it again! Come look at this.”

We all crowded the window. Our neighbor, shirtless, was throwing leaves and brush onto a large bonfire. Ashes fell lightly onto our deck, very much like snow. The bonfire rose higher and higher.

“For Christ sake,” my stepmother said. “He’ll burn the whole neighborhood down.”

“Wow,” Susan said. “Wear a shirt, at least.”

Dustin was laughing and bouncing on the balls of his feet, his hands on the sill for support.

“Where are you going?” my father asked when I was about halfway up the stairs.

“Homework,” I said.

I heard Susan go into the upstairs bathroom a little while later, when everyone else had gone to sleep. She came out pink and steamy from a bath, smelling of watermelon. A towel covered her torso, and she worked her hair with another one, then twisted it into a hive on her head. She squared herself off on my bed, crossed her legs at the ankle. "Lovely room," she said. A joke. My stepmother had populated the room with animal statues and fake hibiscus and bright meadow scenes. It was catalogue-like and did not at all resemble my side of the dorm room, which was plain, like my room at home used to be.

"We were talking about you downstairs," Susan said.

"Have a good laugh?"

She swung off the bed and looked over my shoulder. I was studying physics in school and had designs to restore order in my life where there was disorder. I was not spectacular at math, however.

"I see your problem," Susan said.

"Enlighten me."

"You're assuming."

"Assuming what?"

"That one plus one equals two."

"Don't start."

She took the notebook and pencil I was working with and wrote out a long, complicated proof in which one plus one came out stubbornly to three.

"How about that?" I said.

A calculus teacher from her high school had come up with it and she'd memorized it, she explained. She was genuinely brilliant and I often fantasized about being as smart as her.

"In this house, one plus one equals two," I said and then smiled, trying to conceal my seriousness. Her proof wasn't any help to me, she was showing off.

"Do you think your parents would mind if I had another beer?"

"I think they would be thrilled with the idea. In fact you might wake them up and tell them. They will sleep better knowing. A full, heavy, dream-filled sleep."

"Do you want one?"

"No, thanks. Still working."

She left and I erased her proof, then decided to start again on a new sheet of paper, but I knew I was getting nowhere. I shut my notebook and called to her, saying I changed my mind about the beer.

That night I couldn't sleep. I drank, in fact, three beers, and the last woke me up. I told Susan that I thought Dustin liked her very much, and asked her to treat the situation with care.

"I'm careful," Susan said. "Don't people always say that about me? I think I've heard them say that before." She'd been in my closet and had on about twelve necklaces and a raccoon-face beanie pushed back behind her bangs. She was now walking around the room, messing with everything.

"They say you're reckless." I was sitting straight-legged on the floor, my feet under the dust ruffle.

"Who, me?"

“Deed, you.”

“You’re going to hate me. I’ve been reckless again.”

“Put that back,” I said when she took a glazed yellow plate off its wall holder.

“What did you do this time?”

“We’re going to the lake next weekend.”

“Who is?”

“You, me, Cole, and Bobby. Just for a few hours.”

I made a gun with my hand and pretended to blow my brains out in Susan’s direction. She pretended to be shocked and disgusted, like usual.

Then she plopped down beside me and said, “You’re going. It’s done. Bobby wants you to go. He thinks you’re fun, I don’t know where he got the idea. I told him, actually.”

“Fine. Just for a few hours.”

“Good. But you must promise me one thing.”

“No.”

“Promise promise promise me you won’t complain on the way.”

Now Susan snored beside me, which didn’t help a thing. Outside, the rain came down in sheets.

I went downstairs and made Sleepytime tea, but it was useless. I was up now and would stay up. I sorted through some of the piles of junk, just trying to make sense of it all. Some items were marked with notes that said either “take” or “toss.” Most of these were written in my stepmother’s neat cursive, but some were in Dustin’s slanted, almost

invisible print. I came across an old dollhouse my mother had made for me a few years before she left us. It was of a lightweight, flimsy wood and painted a frosty white on the outside. The note stuck to the roof read “take,” like all of Dustin’s notes.

I soon gave up sorting and went back upstairs, nudged my head into Dustin’s room, which was cast in blue light from all the aquariums and terrariums. Some nights, when I still lived here, I would wake with an unbearable heaviness in my chest and think the python had escaped and gotten me in a death grip. When the feeling passed, I still went across the hall to check on the snake, which would always be there, balled and motionless, like tonight.

Downstairs again, I scooped big spoonfuls of coffee into the drip machine, because my father had forgotten to do it. I started a wash in the laundry room. I considered inking or gluing up Dad’s sweater just so I didn’t have to see them wearing the same thing, but I controlled myself. I sat in his leather recliner, among all the clutter, my feet planted on the carpet in front of me, hands cupping the mug of tea, and listened for night noises, any noises.

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I had an important job in the ceremony. I was the torch bearer. The torch was actually a tiki torch. It was meant to line a path with other tiki torches, but we just had the one. Given my stepmother’s current attitude toward fire, this was a major allowance she made for my brother’s sake. She would not allow the metallic bowl to hold the flame at the end of the ceremony, and I suspected Dustin had thrown a secret tantrum. He was flustered walking down the steps of the deck, his cape flapping behind him. Wet ash smudged the railing, the wicker chairs, the grass. I walked upright with the torch, held it

comically still, hoping Susan could see I was taking this lightheartedly, when really it was almost too much for me. I regretted bringing her here and felt terribly sorry for her.

A sickly cross made from two twigs was stuck into the ground between the shallow grave and a small creek that weaved through several yards in the neighborhood. My father stood beside the grave, leaning on his shovel. Patricia and I flanked him, and Susan and Dustin stood opposite us. Dustin seemed to have recovered his composure. He held the shoebox and wheezed a few deep breaths.

My father had chosen the spot for the grave, dug it, and stuck the cross next to it, but with the coffin now present for comparison, he knew he'd made it too small. So we stood while he enlarged it by cutting dirt off the walls. Max appeared further down our wooden fence. He sniffed the dirt between shrubs as he made his way toward the group, stopping to investigate an upturned fire pit along the way. He sat down next to Susan.

"The dog is a mistake," I whispered to my father. "Big mistake."

"He wants the dog, let him have the dog," he said. Then louder, to everyone, "Is that big enough?"

"Let me see," Patricia said. She took the box from Dustin and placed it in the hole. "Perfect. Nice job, Mike." She beamed at him, and he lifted fresh earth onto the box.

"That's it," he said, and kept tamping the ground and breaking up the bigger chunks and scraping away the rocks.

"Leave the rocks," Patricia said, folding her arms.

"Should we say a few words?" Dad said.



No one spoke for a moment. Finally Patricia said, “Wilbur was a good fish. Everybody liked him, except Mike. Mike hated him because he always had to clean his tank.” Patricia shifted her weight and rested her chin in her right hand. “Dustin, you want to say something?”

Dustin looked at the grave. “Here lies Wilbur,” he said. He ripped up a handful of grass and tossed it onto the grave. He left his arm outstretched for a moment, admiring the way his fingers spread, solemn as hell, then he grabbed Susan’s hand, and I almost fainted. She took it in stride, though. She slid his arm around her waist and put her own arm around his.

“You want to say something?” he said to her.

“Dustin,” I said.

“Well *you* won’t,” Dustin said to me, almost shouting.

“Maybe I will.”

“No, I’d like to say something,” Susan said, straightening. “I never knew Wilbur, but I hear he was a good fish and everybody liked him, except Mike.” My father winked at her, and Patricia made a clucking noise with her tongue. Susan continued, “He was in good company here, and he will be missed.”

I heard whimpers. Dustin was crying, very clearly crying, but trying to cover it up. He turned his face away from Susan and nestled it in the crook of his elbow. My dad and I looked at each other. This was not wholly unexpected. Dad showed his palm to me, as in, stop, let him go, don’t acknowledge anything. Or, maybe not. Maybe he meant, do something, change the subject, help him.

“That’s good, buddy,” Susan said, rubbing his back. “Crying is good.”

“I’m not crying,” he said, then shoved her hand away.

“Hey,” she said. “That was very rude, Dustin.”

Then he ran, if you could call it that. He only took two steps before he tripped over the black cape and fell on his face. He lay there squirming.

The other three went to help. Patricia and Susan each grabbed an arm, and my father crouched behind Dustin’s head, examining his face, picking off pieces of grass. They pulled, tried to help him to his feet.

“That hurts!” Dustin said. “Stop!”

Max tossed back huge sprays of dirt and rock, knocking over the cross. He flicked off the shoebox lid with his nose and ran circles around us with the goldfish in his jaws, baiting us. Patricia went after him.

“We could use a little help here, Sam,” she said. “For Christ sake, you can drop the torch now.”

I was tired from not sleeping the night before, yes, and the Sleepytime tea was starting to get to me, I think, and the tiki flames were beginning to chap my face. I was exhausted, watching them try to lift up my brother, chase down the dog. It was all I could do just to stand there, very still. Eventually I did drop the torch, and was surprised when the yard did not catch fire.

## LOOKER

It goes like this: someone wants to buy something on eBay from someone who lives miles away, but before they pull the trigger they want to make sure it checks out, so they get a “looker” who lives in the area to go see. Usually it’s something like an old Rolls-Royce Phantom or a flat-brim baseball cap signed by George Sherrill—strange things that mean a lot to certain people.

Other times I’d get a task. I’d have to mow someone’s lawn and water a few plants while they were on vacation. Pick up the paper. Let the dog out. Once a week I would go to the cemetery for an old man named Granderson and make sure the flowers on his wife’s grave hadn’t tipped over.

Which is where I was, at the cemetery, when my ex-wife, called and asked me to pick Jen up from school.

“I have to run some errands and I can’t trust her alone,” Stacy said.

“Why can’t you trust her?” I said. By design, I hadn’t seen much of my ex-wife or daughter since the divorce a few months before. As far as I could tell, all parties were happy with the arrangement.

“Why?” She was out of breath. I imagined her brushing away the loose strands of her pulled-up hair, and then having to regain control of the wheel before she drifted too far into oncoming traffic. “Because of her age. Because I remember what I was like at her age. Because of fourteen-year-old boys.”

“Who’s fourteen? Jen?”

“I’ll pretend you’re joking. I’ll pretend you know exactly how old your daughter is.”

“She doesn’t like me. That’s why she’s always with you.”

“She does like you. She’s been asking about you.”

I didn’t believe her, but she’d said it and she wouldn’t back down from it now.

“All right, Stacy, then I just don’t want to. I’m busy today. She can stay at home alone for a few hours. Or she could just go with you. What kind of errands are you running that she can’t go with you?”

“She can’t stay home alone.” There was some muffling, and what sounded like a distant “Shit.” Then Stacy was back on. “I caught her with a boy last time. They weren’t doing anything, but he wasn’t authorized to be there.”

I sighed into the phone, more at her use of “authorized” than anything else.

“Help me out here, Gary.”

“Fine, but I have a lot of stops to make.”

I was troubled that Jen had reached the age of doing whatever it was she was doing in the house with that boy, but I was relieved that Stacy was asking me to do this, because I took it to mean that she had no one else to do it. I didn’t really know what Jen thought of me anymore, and if I had to bet on it, I would say Stacy told Jen this whole thing was my idea, that I wanted to spend more time with her and thought she’d like riding along with me.

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Last time I saw Jen, she had just gotten stitches in her leg from where a bike clipped her. This time, she wore a big black boot that came up to her knee. Apparently she’d sprained her ankle in basketball practice. She’d gone for a loose ball and crashed into Micah, their 200-pound center, a real redwood whose trunks rolled over Jen’s lower

leg on the come-down, and Jen, screaming in pain, took a few wild swings at the girl's body and face before it was all said and done.

“Something against skin and bones?” I said when I picked her up.

“What? I don't have to be flawless,” she said.

By now, I knew better than to respond to this, and I guess I felt sorry for her. She couldn't have felt too sexy trying to maneuver that thing onto the bed.

“Well, Granderson's flowers were still standing,” I said. “Next up, snow globes.”

“Fantastic,” Jen said. She tightened the straps on her boot and then jammed her index finger in her ear. Ever since she was a little girl, she'd always had an inclination for digging around in there. Some sort of disease—disease, or condition?—caused an abnormal amount of earwax to build up in her canals. She fooled with her ears constantly, and Stacy and I had often found smeared yellow wax crusting on the backs of chairs, under tables. It was an unattractive habit any way you looked at it, and I'd told her so more than once. She was doing it just then, and I didn't want that stuff caked in my carpet, but mostly I just didn't want to watch her doing it.

“What have I said about that?”

She kept at it, didn't even turn to look, so I tried a different tack.

“What would that boy think? What's his name?”

She didn't respond to that either, but she took her finger out of her ear.

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The next house on my list was in one of those starter neighborhoods, mostly young couples and their little kids. I drove slowly on the roads, still slick from the morning showers. I had to stop and park while some kids playing hockey in the street

toted their nets onto the sidewalk. They stared as we passed, as if they never expected to see a car come through the neighborhood.

I parked on the curb in front of the house and got out with my clipboard. “Want to come in for this one?” I said, my hand on her open window.

She shook her head. I wasn’t going to sweat it if she was determined to be childish, so I walked on toward the driveway, but then I heard, “Dad.” She pointed to the side of the house, where an old woman was milling around in a patch of dirt and shrubs. She held her shoes, one in each hand.

I headed for the woman and heard the truck door open and close behind me, the soft and then loud swish of wet grass under Jen’s feet.

“Hi there,” I said to the woman. “Everything all right?”

“I was told I’m supposed to live here,” she said. Her eyes were dark and small, like two brown eggs in a nest of pale wrinkles. She was old, but it was more than that. She looked like someone’s *idea* of what old looks like. She wore white pants and a blue shirt, and the shoes she held were house slippers. Her bare feet were muddy.

“What’s your name?” Jen said.

Before she could answer, another woman from the front porch called out:

“Marie!”

“Who’s that calling?”

Jen and I led her around to the porch, where we were met by a short blonde woman.

“There you are,” the woman said.

“Here I am,” Marie said.

The other woman thanked us and introduced herself as Danielle. She was the one I'd come to see about the snow globes. She ushered us in without much explanation.

Danielle sat Marie down at a table in the kitchen. The room smelled of chicken broth and lemon.

"I'm making some soup," Danielle said, indicating a large pot on the stove. She took a rag from a drawer and wet it with warm water from the tap. Then she got on her knees and wiped the mud off Marie's feet. Marie, the whole time, looked bewildered. Danielle left the rag in the sink and frowned at the brown footsteps leading from the front door to Marie's seat. "I'll have to mop that up later. Come with me," she said and smiled.

We left Jen in the kitchen with Marie. "Bad memory," Danielle said in the hallway. "Almost completely gone, really. It's less daunting for her if I call her Marie, instead of Mom."

"Sorry to hear that."

There was a tenderness about Danielle. Her tone was calm and matter-of-fact, but sincere. She moved through the house as if vaguely she sensed she was an inconvenience to her surroundings. She was a little older than me, full-bodied and pretty, as much as you could ask for in a middle-aged woman. I liked her, and I thought, as I occasionally did when on these jobs, about what it would be like to sleep with her.

She took me into the living room, where several shelves on the far wall were covered in snow globes.

"Well, here it is," she said. "I'm sorry, I forgot to ask. Would you like a drink?"

"Sure." A drink was a small thing, it meant nothing, but not every woman I met on the job offered me a drink. Why shouldn't I have been encouraged? I scanned the

room for signs of a husband or boyfriend. The room was plain, besides the wall of snow globes. As far as seating, there was only a soft yellow couch, facing the TV. There were no discarded boxer shorts or loafers lying around, yet neither was there any firm evidence that no men lived there. I figured I could just let it play out, no harm.

I had never cheated on Stacy during our marriage, but in those end times, I had thought about it often. I'd weighed the desirability and likelihood of a number of potential women. I had lingered more than once in some maid's kitchen. The only thing keeping me from it was the obvious fact that the relationship wouldn't survive much longer anyway. I just had to ride it out. Jen was the sole, uninterested strand that held us together, but though no one would say as much then, I'm certain we all hoped badly that something would put a stop to all the misery. Every conversation slid naturally into confrontation. I began to feel that all words and actions were preparation for the last word and action, so when it finally came, it was all simple enough. Jen was out, and Stacy had come home from work and seen me sitting on the couch with a glass of bourbon. A few weeks prior, I had been laid off at my job of fifteen years, which led to a drunken entrance to an AA meeting, which led to a series of other events that, amazingly, didn't help my already tenuous marriage. I'd neglected searching for another job, took up looking instead, despite—or because of—the repeated argument fodder it provided. So walking in after work to me lounging with a tall one didn't sit well with Stacy. Why she chose this moment over other similar moments, I'm not certain, but it might have had something to do with the plastic sheet I'd draped over the couch just a few minutes earlier, in a buzzed and invincible state, so that I didn't have to immerse myself in Jen's earwax anymore. I heard Stacy come in but didn't turn around. I can only imagine the



crushed look on her face, and thinking about it now, I do feel sorry for her. “This is it,” she said. “I’ve had enough.” So natural, it seemed—fourteen years of marriage coming to a point. Then she grabbed the liquor bottle and flung it at the wall, as if she’d also had enough of bourbon, though we both knew that wasn’t true.

I heard the suck of the refrigerator door opening in the next room. Through the doorway I watched Danielle bend to get something from a lower shelf. Her shirt slid up her back, exposing a small shape of pale skin near the waist of her jeans. Then Jen’s head and shoulders came into the frame as she leaned back in a chair, and I tried to act innocent.

Danielle handed me a glass of iced tea, and I realized that I thought she meant an alcoholic drink. But I had a flask of gin in my back pocket.

I learned that Danielle was a meteorologist, but that’s all I got out of her before she returned to the globes.

“How does this work?” she said.

“I’ll just inspect each of these—or, the ones you’re selling—by the way, how many are you selling?”

She said, “All of them,” which made both our heads turn toward the shelves, the outrageous number of globes—the boards sagged under their weight—now real and imposing. I felt that creeping anxiety that I used to get walking into my old living room, knowing before my eyes could confirm it that each piece of furniture might be smeared with earwax.

“Okay. So,” I said. “I’ll inspect all of these for scratches and cracks, things like that, and make sure they’re all here and match your description from the site, and then I

just send my report back to the interested party. If everything checks out, you should be good to go.”

“I’m sure you’ll find that everything checks out.”

I began the tedious process of scrutinizing each of the dozens of snow globes. I wanted to present myself to Danielle as a thorough and serious professional, because that’s what I thought she would like. Danielle didn’t say much; she just watched me, which intensified the whole procedure. But there was a little relief in the work. Some of the globes were striking, even beautiful, in their detail and design.

“Do you have any favorites?” I said.

“No. I love them all, I mean,” she said, but seemed to shrink back a little.

“They’re my mother’s, actually. Marie’s. They’re all from different cities she’s been to.”

“She’s been to all these places?”

“It’s amazing, really.”

“I love to travel,” I lied. I’d never been out of the country.

“I don’t do much traveling,” she said. “I’d like to. What’s your favorite place you’ve been?”

“Mexico,” I said, and hoped she knew nothing about Mexico.

She smiled and nodded. I think she could sense my discomfort, because she willingly offered, “You might come across a postcard. The ones she sent I kept near the corresponding globe.”

I glanced up and saw a few flat edges protruding from the shelf.

“I should check on the soup,” she said. When she left, I unscrewed the flask and drained some of the gin into my cup. I kept inspecting the globes. I picked up the

gaudiest one—from Paris. It had a heavy metal base and gold buildings inside the glass. The Eiffel Tower stood tall in the foreground. Some of the other structures looked unique, but my knowledge of Paris was limited. I only recognized the iconic iron lattice.

Laughter from the kitchen—two high-pitched howls, Danielle and Marie.

I gave in to the urge to read some of the postcards. I slid one away from the shelf where the Paris globe had been. Another picture of the Eiffel Tower. The other side read “Where’s Marie?” with an arrow pointing to the edge. I flipped it back over. I hadn’t noticed it before, but a stick figure with straw-like hair perched in the tower.

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“This is going to take a while,” I said, setting the clipboard and Paris globe on the kitchen table.

Danielle was still at the stove, stirring the soup with a large wooden spoon.

“Would you two like to stay for lunch? I’ve made plenty.”

“We would love to,” I said.

Jen slumped in her seat and glared at me.

“Don’t slouch,” Marie said. “Take after her.” She pointed a bony finger at Danielle.

“Don’t give her such a hard time, Marie,” Danielle said.

I said, “Jen used to love snow globes.”

“That’s right,” Jen said, grinning, and I was afraid of what she might say next.

“You used to give me snow globes all the time. Where did you get all those snow globes?”

“Mexico.”

“Ah, yes, Mexico,” she said, and her smile let me know she’d heard my conversation with Danielle. “You sure were in Mexico a lot.”

I finished my drink.

“You want to talk about Mexico.” Marie rolled the left sleeve of her shirt and turned her shoulder to Jen.

“Hey, Marie’s got ink.” Jen’s face lit up.

“Read that,” Marie said. At some point, when I was inspecting the snow globes, Marie had come alive. She was a different person.

Jen squinted and said, “Foro Sol.”

“That’s right. Do you know what that means?”

“Not a clue.”

“Sun Forum. It’s a stadium in Mexico City, and it’s enormous.” Marie spread her arms as much as she could, then pointed at Danielle again. “And it’s where that one was conceived.”

I looked over at Danielle, whose back was turned to us, still adding herbs and spices to the soup. She worked quickly and accidentally knocked over a small bottle of dried thyme. She stopped, and I watched her head tilt up, pleading, and the steam from the pot looked to be rising from her shoulders. She seemed irritated, and I felt myself falling for her.

Then I heard the sharp snap of skin hitting skin. Marie had slapped Jen’s hand away from her ear, and now she was scolding her.

“It’s okay,” I said. “She has a disease.”

“It’s a condition!” Jen protested.

Marie spat out a laugh. “You sound like my daughter. Not weatherman. Meteorologist.”

I tried to exit as gracefully as possible, thanking Danielle for the lunch offer but saying we needed to get going. “Is it all right if I come back another time to finish?”

“Of course. I have to get to work anyway,” Danielle said. “Just call ahead and let me know when you want to come.” She apologized for Marie as she wrote her home and work numbers on a piece of paper, and even though I already had her information, I took it.

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The next assignment was another solitary job; a couple intended to rent a cabin in the hills for a vacation. They had planned this far in advance of the vacation dates, so I had plenty of time to inspect the cabin. The owner had written down that the key would be hidden in one of the plants on the front porch, but he didn’t specify which one. After a few minutes of searching, I found it half-buried in a potted cactus.

The cabin was spacious and smartly decorated. I didn’t expect to find many issues, but these places are built cheaply so you can’t always tell. Wildfires are common around here, and the cabins are built so close together that a stiff wind can decimate a whole hillside of them in a few hours. Rebuilding in time to minimize tourism profit loss will lead to shortcuts.

While I worked, Jen lounged on the plush couch and watched a cooking show on the huge TV. She hadn’t said much, but I could tell she liked the cabin and was content there on the sofa. I thought back to when she was a baby, and I used to lie on the couch,

holding her while she slept. Were Stacy and I happy then? It's hard to say, but watching Jen, I did feel something—if not happiness, then at least a small satisfaction.

I went upstairs and, when I thought I was out of Jen's earshot, I called Danielle. I tried her home phone, but there was no answer, so I called the local weather station where she worked. A man answered, and I hung up. On the next one, I hit zero and an automated voice read names and extensions. When Danielle answered, I realized I had nothing to say. There was no reason for me to be calling her at work unless I planned to finish the snow globe job.

"Sir? Can I help you?"

"I was just wondering about the forecast for tomorrow."

"Partly cloudy, thirty percent chance of rain throughout the day."

"I see. And what's the high?"

"Eighty-three."

"And what's the forecast for the next hundred years?"

"I'm sorry?"

"I was just wondering what I could expect for the next hundred years or so, weather-wise."

There was a pause, and then she said, "Gary?"

"It's me." Another pause. She was trying to figure out what I was up to.

"Snow," she said finally. "Snowflakes the size of cars that crash down on the town and cause widespread destruction. People will panic, and then they'll look up at the sky and instead of the sun, there will be a large eyeball staring back at them."

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In the car, Jen was typing something into her phone, looking bored. I was feeling better about the day and didn't want Jen to ruin it, so, taking a stab at being light, I said, "Ugh, Carmen, my dad is such a dope. He thinks he can make up for his shortcomings by bringing me along to work."

She rolled her eyes up at me. "You got it," she said, gave an ironic, squinting grin and went back to her phone.

I continued in an even snobbier voice. "Mom, Dad is so annoying. He's mocking me and he won't stop. Please save me from this hell."

She sat up, holding the phone in both hands. "My dad is such a *douche*," she said. "He doesn't know it, but I saw him spike his drink. He invites me to spend time with him but he can't even go thirty minutes without trying to get lit. What a *douche*." She looked up. "No one says *dope* anymore. And, by the way, I wasn't texting. I was looking up tattoo parlors." She flashed the screen at me, and I caught a glimpse of some bright, neon lettering.

"You're not old enough for that."

"And you're too old for the way you act."

"All right, look, I'm sorry about all that. Why don't you come out with me again tomorrow? I'll be good." I was surprised I offered, actually, but I couldn't stand her acting so pitiful.

"That was a mean thing. Saying I have a disease."

"I'm sorry, Jen. I truly am. Please come. I still have cabin access. We'll hang out there. You can watch the big TV."

I didn't think she'd ever agree, but she said, "I'll think about it."

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I returned to the cabin over the next few days, kept a case of beer in the fridge. I even brought a load of laundry over one day so I could wash my clothes for free, for once. Sometimes I would walk around the house, stand in the different rooms, imagine the kinds of people who had stayed there, and the kinds of things they did. Then I would take a beer out of the fridge and sit on the back porch, where a thicket of bamboo grew inexplicably just below the deck. Some doomed husband's project, I thought, and then I was done with thinking. I would just sit and look out over the blue hills. And always I would call Danielle at the station, and listen to her tell me what was in store for the weather.

“Would you believe me if I said SUV-sized snowflakes again?” she said.

“Again?” I said, looking at the cloudless, solid sky. “But it's so pretty up here.”

“Up where?”

“One of these vacation cabins with a punned name. This one's called Bear Naked, or Open for Grizzness, something like that. They all seem to want to call attention to the area's bear factor.”

“The chalets! I've been looking into those. Thinking of buying to rent, I mean.”

I cringed any time someone tried to dress a thing up by giving it a name it didn't deserve, and Danielle calling these boxes of wood “chalets” was no exception. “I highly recommend them. Immaculate stuff,” I said. “Bearadise.” I finished my beer and tossed the can into the bamboo. “You know, I'm coming back here tomorrow. I would invite you up for a first-hand look, but apparently there's this crazy snowstorm moving in.”



“You know what? Breaking weather news: no storm tomorrow. The maps are clear.”

After we got off the phone, I called the property owner and said I hadn't finished inspecting the cabin yet. I told him I was going to leave the key under the welcome mat from now on, instead of in the potted cactus, which had stuck me every time.

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Danielle said Marie was sure to get into trouble if she stayed home alone, so she came with us to the cabin the next day. Danielle brought along the Paris globe to keep her occupied. I had just pulled out of their driveway when I got a text from Jen saying she wanted to come out again, and needed me to pick her up. “I hope you don't mind,” I told the women. “Not at all. Jen's lovely company,” Danielle said. Marie said nothing.

When I got to the house, sitting in the driveway was a green Volvo that I'd never seen before.

“Wiley's here,” Jen said when she came outside.

“Wiley?”

“New guy. Musician. Zydeco.”

“Wait, your mom's dating someone?”

“Yeah.”

I shook my head, then stopped, then shook my head some more. I didn't know what to say. I turned and saw Danielle, realized she was getting way more information than I felt comfortable giving.

“If this is a bad time,” Danielle said, showing me her hands.

“No, no,” I said. She sat back but still looked uncertain. “Well,” I said to Jen, trying to save myself, “how’s it going with them?”

She shrugged. “We’re getting used to the washboard.” She got into the truck and closed the door without saying anything else.

The next thing I knew I was in my old living room, standing stupidly just inside the door, Jen behind me. I had only been back a couple times since the divorce, and I felt uncomfortable, standing there, like something tragic had happened just before I walked in, and no one knew how to tell me. Had the room changed? I couldn’t tell, but then again, I had never noticed any decorative changes Stacy might have made while we were together. I picked up a picture of Stacy and Jen laughing, framed by sparkling gold plastic. Down the hall I could hear the shower running, and I knew it was Wiley.

“I like that shirt,” Stacy said. “Pink looks good on you.” She didn’t seem surprised to see me. She leaned against the kitchen jamb and crossed one ankle over the other. Her hair was up in a ponytail.

“It’s not pink, it’s a light red.”

She pointed her finger at my shirt. “That is pink.”

“It’s like a salmon color.”

“Look, I was just trying to compliment your shirt.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Do you want a drink or anything?”

I patted the flask in my back pocket, hoping it would upset her.

Stacy shifted her weight abruptly and folded her arms. She looked at Jen and then back at me. “Is there something I can help you with, Gary?”

“There is something.” But then I heard the thud of the shower turning off, and felt Jen’s small hand on my arm. Stacy looked at my hands and I remembered I was holding the picture. I set it down, but I couldn’t quite get the angle right.

“Are you here because of her?” Stacy said, jutting her chin toward Jen.

“No,” Jen said. “We’re leaving. We’re going to Tijuana and getting tattoos. It’s been our dream.”

Tension between Stacy and Jen? This was new, and it stirred something warm in me, as if the last few years had been cast in endless night, and here, finally, was the first point of light rising in the distance. If Wiley had walked out of the bathroom naked I might’ve shaken his hand.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Stacy said. “And don’t stay gone too long.” She moved to the window and held back the curtain. “Who are they?” Danielle and Marie were still in the car. I’d forgotten about them.

“Oh,” I said, laughing. “That’s my friend, Danielle. And that’s her mother.”

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At the cabin, I took a couple beers from the fridge for Danielle and me, and when I saw Jen staring I realized my mistake. She didn’t get mad at my drinking, though. She felt sorry for me, I’m sure, but not sorry enough to keep her mouth shut during the car ride up here. “I should’ve told you, but it’s good you know,” she kept saying, and I had to fill in the gaps for Danielle without divulging too much. Ex-wife, new boyfriend, some sort of argument between ex-wife and daughter. It occurred to me that Wiley might have been involved in a greater capacity. “Did he have any part of this?” I asked Jen. “Not physically, no,” she said. “Conceptually, yes.” I could tell Danielle was uncomfortable,

so I told Jen we would talk later. "I'm just saying," she said, "she can be a real bitch sometimes." Then Marie said, "I never liked her. I've always said it," and that made us laugh and loosen up a little, though Danielle still tried to blend in with the cloth seat.

Jen and Marie wandered off together, Jen giving her a tour of the place. Danielle and I went to the back porch and sat in the wooden chairs. She complimented the cabin and said she was glad to look at one with an expert, though I was no expert and we hadn't done so much as turn over a pillow on the couch. She apologized for "invading our family privacy," which sounded like a prompt. I said, "I'd rather not talk about it. But you don't have to apologize."

"I understand," she said, waving the topic away. "I'm sorry I mentioned it."

"Danielle."

"Right," she said. "Can I tell you a story? About Marie. It might help."

"Why not?"

"With her, things got bad quickly," she said. "Soon she did not recognize me. Sometimes she does, and those used to be joyous moments. The days she woke up and said my name were the greatest days of my life. I swear it. The greatest days of my life, that's what it felt like. Do you get my meaning?"

She was lecturing me. I'd gone from an evening at a cabin with a woman to getting lectured.

"There was still joy in my life," she continued. "It was a different kind of joy, but it was just as joyous."

She looked at me anxiously, to see if I had grasped the truth she was laying down. I gave a solemn nod, though I wasn't sure what she was getting at.

“But eventually those days when she recognized me came less and less often, and again my heart began to break. I finally realized, though, that because they came so rarely, that when they did come, they had a much more powerful effect on me.”

I couldn't take much more of it. I drained my beer and took out the flask; at least, I thought, a strong drink would make the whole thing endurable. I raised it to her.

“No, thank you. What I'm saying is, there's still hope for happiness. You just don't know what it looks like yet.”

“What you're saying is, the days ahead are bright and sunny,” I said, laughing into the flask's nozzle.

Her face turned hard. Apparently she considered weather to be a special topic between us, and didn't appreciate me talking about it in a way that wasn't flirtatious.

“Well, if you're going to be like *that*,” she said.

I took another drink from the flask and set it down between us.

“Okay, you're right,” she said. “It's not all wonderful. I never meant to suggest it was always wonderful.” She touched her hair vaguely and then grabbed a few strands, studied them, her lips pursed. She let each strand drop from between her fingers until one was left: darker than the others. She reached for the flask but let too much flow over her lips. She spewed straight ahead, and a second later we heard a light pattering on the bamboo stalks.

We sat for a few moments without talking, and then Marie came outside.

“My mother's coming to pick me up,” she said.

“You're eighty, your mother's not coming to pick you up,” Danielle said.

“Hey, that’s the way,” I said. “Let some storm clouds into your sky.” I was careful not to say any more than that. I didn’t want her to become too attached. I’d already decided I didn’t want to see her again.

She laughed and took another drink. “Sometimes I wonder if I could have had another life.”

“Don’t feel bad,” I offered weakly.

“I know. Your life isn’t incredible either. Constant thunderstorms.”

Maybe she was right, but I was slightly annoyed that she said it. “It’s not so bad.” She seemed not to have heard me.

“It’s partly my fault,” she said. “But it’s partly her fault. It’s your fault, Marie.”

“What did I do?” Marie said and then paid no attention.

“Do you want to know what she was like before this?”

Till then, it hadn’t crossed my mind, and now that she was asking, I really didn’t want to know. I avoided looking at her, but out of the corner of my eye I could see her looking at me, searching my face for a sign to either go on or stop.

“Never mind,” she said. “I’m boring you.”

This, her attempt to be perceptive and guess my thoughts rather than ask me directly, reminded me of my ex-wife. If I had been talking to Stacy, I would’ve stayed silent and let her glare until she shook her head and turned back to her book or the TV, or left the room, and I could expect not to hear much from her or Jen for a while, and somewhere down the line I realized I preferred it that way. But because I didn’t know Danielle very well, and because I didn’t have to say or do anything and there were no

expectations on me to be anyone, and because my relationship to this woman was not troubled by any sort of history, I found it easier to say, “No, go on.”

“Well, first,” she said, waving the flask, “I wasn’t conceived at that stadium,” Danielle said. “It was built twenty years ago.” She explained that when she was still young, Marie left her and her father and traveled. She traveled everywhere, and occasionally she sent a postcard briefly detailing the different places she’d been in the particular city. Danielle didn’t see her for years, and they barely kept in touch. When her father died, Marie came back, and—she had her own regrets—tried to reconnect with Danielle. She stayed in the city, and they gave it a shot, but it wasn’t working. It was too hard, for both of them. Then Danielle began to notice Marie’s forgetfulness, thinking nothing of it at first. It got bad enough that she felt she had to do something about it. With no one else to look after her, Danielle took her in. Her personality was so different, so docile now because she was so often confused.

“I give her the snow globes when she’s forgetful because they keep her occupied. She’ll spend hours looking at them, maybe trying to figure out why she feels something from them, I don’t know.”

The light was fading. It was that time of day when you saw everything at its plainest and truest, unaltered by the sun, which had just sunk behind the shortest building in town. The time of day when, for about twenty minutes, all your pretensions about your surroundings drop away. The sky was a pale robin egg blue, turning darker. My shirt was faded and pink, and there on the sleeve, an amber smear.

Danielle told another story about how she used to sell honey by the side of the road. I couldn’t figure out what that had to do with Marie, but I’d stopped listening. I was

thinking about other things. I was thinking about Jen getting out of my truck and trudging up the steps—shoulders slumped and feet hitting the concrete hard, each step a new and unique burden.

“Selling honey, I’ll never forget that,” Danielle said and turned to me. “Now you. Tell me something good from your old life.”

And right then I tried, but it was hard to think of anything good, it was hard when the things I’d been turning over in my mind the past few years had only been the arguments, the malicious fighting, the drunken, stupid wars, and my daughter’s scowls. I tried to think about holding Jen on the couch, but it faded and turned into another memory, one where she woke up crying in the middle of the night, and Stacy and I fought about whose turn it was to take her. It seemed she could only remember the times she took her, and the same went for me. We fought ourselves wide awake, and Jen cried more for it. I felt ice in my throat because of that, and because I knew that much of that fighting was my fault.

Then Jen came out and asked where Marie was. I looked around. She was gone.

Jen said they’d been playing Chinese checkers upstairs, and when Jen won, Marie got frustrated and left.

“I didn’t think to follow her. I figured she’d just go down to the porch.”

“She did, but she must have gone back inside. We’ll check out front,” I said. “We would’ve seen her if she was anywhere around back.”

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Jen was slow in her boot. Danielle walked ahead of us, her arms folded against the chill of the wind.



Jen's phone rang, and she stopped to answer it. She turned away and walked back a few steps for privacy. I waited for her to hang up and asked who it was.

"Mom. She's wondering where I am. She doesn't trust me. Or she doesn't trust you. Both, I guess."

We walked on together and I said, "We should do this more often. I mean it."

Jen looked ahead. She lifted her finger to her ear but only brushed her hair behind it. "I'll think about it."

"Back to the cabin. You like the cabin. Hell, I'll buy the cabin," I said, though I didn't have the money and knew it wouldn't have mattered if I did.

"I can't," she said, her finger giving in, just for a second. She added, "Feels like it might snow."

We walked down the dirt paths until we came up on the main road. It was dusk now and colder. Jen spotted Marie standing on the road's shoulder, dangerously close to the traffic.

"Marie," I called.

Danielle's face was strangely vacant, relaxed. She watched Marie as she might watch a child going into the first day of school, wanting both to hold on and to let go. Danielle just stood there, unwilling to move, even when I said her name. Finally Jen and I left her and retrieved Marie.

"Here, Marie." I reached out and led her away from the road.

"Oh, it's my friends," Marie said to us.

"We're not your friends," I said.

Jen gave me a look, threw her arm around Marie's shoulder and pulled her away from me. Stacy had always said I pushed people away. Jen overheard once and said, "Push? He doesn't let anyone get close enough to push."

It was dark by the time we began driving back into town. Danielle had her face turned to her window, one hand on her forehead. Jen was messing with the Velcro boot straps, and Marie was holding the snow globe, somewhere far away. I looked at the road in front of us, trying to remember what exactly had changed me over the years, when and why, but I couldn't pinpoint any specific moments.

And then—what can I say?—I saw the four of us as someone from the outside might have seen us: a family, unhappy, driving from the vacation house back to the home we've weighted down with experiences. I was not ready to repeat that yet.

"Is she all right?" Marie said, leaning between the two front seats. "I think I have a Tums in some tinfoil in my purse." She settled back in her seat, didn't look for a purse. Then, maybe just realizing she was holding something, she said, "Where's this?" and lifted the globe up between Danielle and me.

"That's Paris, Marie," I said.

"Oh," she said, sitting back. "Paris."

"Did you like Paris, Marie?" Jen said.

"Oh, yes. I loved it."

"What did you love about it?" Jen said.

She peered down at the globe, as if trying to find herself somewhere in it—walking into a café for a cup of coffee, or waving up from the miniature Eiffel Tower.

"You don't remember, Marie," Danielle said. "You don't remember Paris."