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The University of Southern Mississippi

MOON LANDING

by

Jennifer Ann Marquardt

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
Of the University of Southern Mississippi
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2011

ABSTRACT

MOON LANDING

by Jennifer Ann Marquardt

May 2011

The following short stories began and were finished—at least as finished as they appear here—during my time at the Center for Writers.

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2011

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A Dissertation
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May 2011

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INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, my parents moved to Hilo, Hawaii, and I made the trip with them, staying in a hotel room next to theirs for a few weeks. When anyone asked how I liked my time in Hawaii, I said it was lovely. You have to say this. If you don't, they will think you haven't appreciated the landscape properly. And if you can't appreciate that kind of beauty—because it is literally breathtaking—there must be something wrong with you.

And truthfully, it was lovely in some ways: I was introduced to white pineapple, which is smaller, sweeter and more delicate than any other pineapple. I met a happily drunk bride in the lobby who eagerly told guests en route to their rooms that they were beautiful, beautiful people. These small celebrations of the world were a happy thing, easily transferable into stories because, as Steven Barthelme says, writing is itself a celebration of the world.

Still, much of the trip was marked by what went wrong: far away in Indiana, my grandfather died; my mother became very ill and, in her fever, was convinced of various approaching apocalypses so that she could not be left alone; the hotel bar closed at nine. When I did wander out, it was when my parents were finally asleep in the adjoining hotel room. In my mid-twenties, I felt I was sneaking out, which made me feel giddy and free and illicit so that I did stupid things like walk into groups of local fishermen collected near the dock. The men were kind, though, and told me things about Hawaii. There is a large sum of federal money to compensate for the colonization of the island, but the Hawaiian people can't agree on how to spend it and so they don't, allowing their houses to become increasingly dilapidated while they dream of how to spend it. The fisherman

also confirmed that Hawaiians generally hate U.S. tourists as much as anyone else hates U.S. tourists and that their smiles and hospitality—at least towards us—are all show. I learned that there is a pond, less than forty yards across, that no one has ever found the bottom of. That is when I started to understand the place around me: the rainforest across the bay was no longer a flat green backdrop, but perhaps the location of that bottomless pond; the maid that smiled and told my feverish mother that no, there were no tsunamis coming, probably disliked her intensely; the fisherman who told me he was visiting his brother might have been greeted at his brother's door, offered a Bud Lite, and taken on a tour of the house, talking about the walls that will be knocked down or the furniture that will be purchased when they get their share of the reparation money.

I am not relating anything that anyone does not already know. If you look around enough, there are always delighting things to find. And most people also know that the delight does not come from the object itself, but the process of searching, the negotiation of an unfamiliar landscape that can alter and shape an experience.

The negotiation of landscape and space is something I find particularly interesting. I am in love with maps and the ways that any one space can be represented, the ways that flawed maps are sometimes truer representations of a place than accurate maps. Geographical and political and topographical maps are all wonderful, but so are the maps that mark the location of every poplar tree in San Francisco or the map that marks the location of murders in that same city. I am interested in the relationship people have to location, the way that location can define a person. Lera Boroditsky, a professor of psychology at Stanford, studies an aboriginal tribe in Australia. While Americans and most of the western world orient themselves with the simple phrases of “left” or “right,”

Boroditsky notes that members of the aboriginal community orient themselves directionally: children asked to point out Northeast do so without hesitation and are always correct; salutations translate into, “Where are you going?” and the answers are specific and based on geographic direction, something like, “North northwest in the middle distance” (63); when asked to place a series of cards in order, rather than ordering the cards left to right as Westerners do, or right to left as Hindus do, members of this tribe order the cards East to West, regardless of the direction they are facing at the time. Boroditsky related that she felt lost in this culture where she was one of the few people unable to orient herself in this very particular, directional way. She suspected that the tribe considered her especially stupid. At one point, to her own surprise, Boroditsky visualized her location aerially, like a map in which she was a red dot moving across the landscape. “Of course,” the members of the tribe responded when she told them. “How else would you do it?” (Boroditsky 67). The tribe members have this awareness all the time, always monitoring themselves within their space.

Certainly I can identify with Boroditsky’s story, having often felt like an outsider who suddenly realized how very outside she was, not knowing the hostility towards tourists or the that there was such a thing as a pond without a bottom. But these experiences also recall Frederic Jameson’s notion of “cognitive mapping,” how people make sense of their surroundings. I very much like this theory, though I do not think that it completely explains Boroditsky’s story. It does not, for example, explain the researcher’s sudden realization in which she was able to view her own location within a space. This realization, a recontextualization of self and space, is what interests me most, the moment of change where a person sees herself and the world around her differently

than she did before. Most of my stories work toward this moment, and so my settings are often spaces that are not only mapable, but initially unknown, so that the character—and the reader—explore and map and know it.

This is why most of my stories contain unfamiliar landscapes such as the jungles of Hawaii, New Guinea, or the strange and intricately constructed interior of the Hindenburg, and most of my characters grope their way through them. I must credit Dr. Martina Sciolino, a critic and a member of my dissertation committee, with the idea of groping, as it was her observation. I prefer “groping” over “grasping” because the latter suggests that the hand has wrapped around an object, that the object has already been seized and known. Groping, however, suggests that the hand is still searching, still fumbling around in that unknowable space.

This groping occurs literally in several stories. In “Poisonous Birds,” which takes place in the jungles of New Guinea, Anna has lost the sensation in her hands and the story closes as she feels her way through a dark cave:

She puts her arm straight out in front of her and moves it in an arc from one side to the other, only knowing that something is in the way when the movement is restricted. She expects that when she comes out of the cave, her hands will be cut to shreds. They’re practically not hands at all anymore. They might as well be wings.

This groping is a radically new form of navigation for Anna. Previously, at the beginning of the story, she is running, not noticing anything except that which is threatening, or which she at least perceives as threatening. Most of her time is spent studying the minute details of bird feathers, which is also a kind of mapping—the search for the part of the

bird's body that generates a poison is not so different from the search for treasure on some desert island. The problem is that neither the blurring through the landscape nor studying only this small piece of it are adequate explorations of Anna's physical surroundings, and her lack of awareness of her surroundings embodies a disorientation of self. She is lost, essentially abandoned by her colleague and lover. Anna becomes sealed off from the rest of the world, able to focus only on the birds she studies. She is just aware enough to know that she must seem crazy to the brother who arrives to distract her and, eventually, allows him to pull her into the woods and caves where, with the sensation gone in her fingers and her vision reduced, Anna is no longer capable of either studying minute details or speeding past them. She must pay attention to the nuances of the space around her and orient herself in relation to it, which is a thing she has not done before. The groping, then, constitutes a recontextualization of space and of self in which the character comes to know—or at least begins to know—both.

The writers I admire most are writers whose fiction also focuses on the relationship between self and space. In a scene of Anton Chekhov's "The Lady and the Pet Dog," Gurov is walking his daughter to school, explaining the differences between the air of the upper atmosphere and the air of the lower atmosphere, when he realizes that, like the element of air that displays such dichotomous qualities, he himself has

two lives: one, open, seen and known by all who cared to know, full of relative truth and of relative falsehood" and that "everything that [is] essential, of interest and of value to him, everything in which he [is] sincere and [does] not deceive himself, everything that [makes] the kernel of his life, [is] hidden from other people. (229)

Considering the space around him aids Gurov in arriving at a new understanding of his own nature.

Similarly, in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Aureliano Buendia recalls the image of ice in a carnival as he faces the firing squad. Ice as an object represents a magical quality, an unknown object to Buendia. I imagine Buendia's perception of ice to be much like my perception of the bottomless pond. It is a fascinating thing, one that marks a fascination with and connection to the world. And this connection is all the more heartbreaking for Buendia, who is about to be executed, because we see that he loves being in the world. He does not want to leave it.

Andrea Barrett's short story "The Forest" also uses a physical space to influence and inform the self. A famed Polish chemist is lecturing in America, feeling displaced and isolated, abandoned at a party held in his honor. He is rescued by Rose, a student who believes he must find America ugly, as his perception of it has been restricted to airplanes and car rides. So Rose takes him away from the party to a field where the two observe deer grazing at sunset. Rose's anticipation of the chemist's relationship to space reflects also on the way that she perceives space. In sharing the field with the chemist, Rose is sharing a secret. She not only offers up a different view of space, but also of herself.

Other stories that situate self and space are Aimee Bender's "Fruit and Words" and Lori Ostlund's "Bed Death." Both stories deal with the trajectory of characters after a breakup, negotiating the foreign spaces of the desert or the streets of Malaysia. One character succeeds in negotiating her space while the other fails. And I see this success or

failure mapping quite neatly onto the characters' trajectory out of heartbreak: one is one her way out, the other will be there for a while.

Like these other writers' characters' exploration of space, Grace Paley's recurring character Faith is constantly gauging and exploring distance. In "Faith in a Tree," Faith—Paley's recurring character who frequently narrates the stories—sits in a tree, observing her children in the playground as well as other children and mothers and the occasional passerby. The playground becomes its own world, its spatial landscape described in nautical terms:

Mrs. Junius Finn...moving slow—a couple of redheaded cabooses dragged by clothesline at her stern; on her fat upper deck, Wiltwyck, a pale three-year-old captain with smoky eyes...Mrs. Finn goes puff puffing toward the opinionated playground, that sandy harbor...Along the same channel...tilting delicately like a boy's sailboat, Lynn Ballard floats past my unconcern to drop light anchor. (Paley 176)

The women are described as vessels crossing oceanic bodies of water, which expands the playground to a series of islands populated by mothers and children. This is the world that the narrator inhabits where the concerns are immediate and personal, revolving around their children, a flirtatious man and a group of protesters. And while Faith carries on conversations, she is largely a passive spectator.

This playground world is a much different place than what the narrator terms, "the man wide world": the jungle from which her estranged husband Ricardo sends letters to tell her he is ill, having an affair, and needs money (Paley 175).

Then Faith's son Richard reiterates the message of the protesters, writing their slogan on the sidewalk in huge letters so that it becomes a large, albeit temporary, feature of the landscape. The recognition of this feature is what catalyzes the change of both Faith and her surroundings. The playground is recontextualized as the small place that it is and Faith is recontextualized as the inhabitant of a small space with limited scope.

Now she changes both her space and self, becoming one of the "women and men in different lines of work, whose minds were made up and directed out of that sexy playground by my children's heartfelt brains, I thought more and more and every day about the world (Paley 194). In addition to shifting her perspective of self, Faith has noticeably shifted her perspective of the "man-wide world" (Paley 175). It is no longer the foreign or mysterious jungle operated by absent men. It has now become simply, "*the world*," (emphasis mine) that Faith herself occupies and operates (Paley 194).

Paley's characters are often limited by their fixation on their own personal space, overly concerned with personal relationships or personal politics, so that when they are recontextualized, it is to occupy a larger, more global perspective. I am not so political. My characters do not change their political awareness, but their spatial awareness. They begin by piecing apart tiny sections of the world, studying birds or lichen or any small, personal obsession. The shift occurs when they look up and see that there is, in fact, a vast and interesting jungle around them.

The creation of these stories has, in some ways, been like constructing my own jungle. It has been an excuse for me to become temporarily obsessed with these small details like white pineapple: there really are such things as hooded pitouhi birds in New

Guinea and they do have poisonous feathers; the Hindenburg really did have a piano covered in pigskin and a double-walled smoking room.

It is my own way of looking up, of getting out of my own head, and celebrating the world.

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MOON LANDING

Now that Ben is gone to wherever he is gone to, Hayden has the house to herself. She has always been aware of its size, the ridiculousness of it—probably too aware. But now it seems unbearable. She has moved the coffee maker into the bathroom so she won't have to walk all the way to the kitchen in the morning, down the stairs with the cherry wood banister, passing underneath the reproduction of *Guernica* that Ben did in college. It is too much in the morning, she thinks, all those body parts.

Ben got a call from NASA a few days ago. They want him to design a landing structure. The structure is for the moon, which they have determined is slowly gravitating toward earth. It will land near Malaysia in a few months. At first Ben had thought it was a crank call, but he listened to the alternate plan: launching nuclear missiles at the moon to throw it off course; some people were in favor of that idea and there was a little chaos just now, but they wanted to be prepared. Of course they will cover expenses. Could he be in Malaysia by Sunday?

He calls her Sunday night from Toronto, talking about the fish n chips he's just had at a place near the hotel. "We should vacation here," he says. "The pub food's as good as London."

"They don't really know where it's going to land, do they?" Hayden says when he tells her where he is.

"It's early still," he says, and talks about a shop he wandered into and the water bill, which is due by the fifteenth.

Hayden rummages around Ben's desk for the checkbook. She is surprised to find that he has personalized stationery with his initials in neat, masculine letters. Probably a gift from his mother. She also finds an envelope of photos from their honeymoon that she has never seen: she and Ben on the beach, she and Ben on the beach with the Sara, Ben and Sara. There is one of Hayden by herself, looking very young and sleepy on a balcony. The backdrop is all palm fronds and fuchsia flowers.

Sara, Ben's daughter from a previous marriage, had joined them on their honeymoon. Her mother made arrangements to be out of the country during the wedding and had phoned to say she was staying away indefinitely. There had been some discussion of Sara staying with a relative during the honeymoon, but Hayden thought she might feel abandoned, that that would be the wrong way to start.

So the three of them went to Hawaii. They stayed on the Big Island and Hayden fell ill the first day, spending hours on the bathroom floor and later vomiting into a waste can from one of the beds while Ben watched her from the other.

"Your stepmother isn't feeling well," he explained to Sara, who appeared in the doorway complaining of boredom. She was twelve, already taller than Hayden, and leaning against the door jamb looking disgusted. Sara said something under her breath and Ben made a face at her. Hayden laughed, then vomited over the side of the bed. When she finished, Sara hadn't moved.

"Gross," she said.

Eventually it became necessary to find a doctor. Ben did this, then took Sara out for dinner. Dr. Hamuraka—he preferred to be called by his last name—was the hotel

doctor who gave her a shot to ease the nausea and a bottle of blue Gatorade. “For electrolytes,” he said, using the desk chair to wheel his way between Hayden and his small duffle bag of supplies on the table. “You should feel better within a few hours.” The injection did make her feel better, though it also made her drowsy. “Tomorrow you will be off horseback riding.”

But the next day it was only Ben and Sara who went riding. Hayden was still feeling weak. She signed Ben and Sara up for surfing lessons, tours, a whale-watching boat ride, filling up their week and Hamuraka set her up on the balcony. Whenever she thinks of Hawaii, it is all sticky white metal railings and overly bright flowers, waiting for the week to run out.

Hamuraka sat with her for hours, talking so she wouldn't have to. Lots of people were having reactions to the vog, he told her. Vog was what the locals called the mixture of smog and volcanic debris in the air. She had all the symptoms. It was then that he took the photo. “Something for your children,” he said and she considered telling him that there would be no children, that Ben didn't want to do it all over again. It was something they agreed upon.

Instead, she listened to Hamuraka's own story: he had been a tourist in Hawaii some twenty years ago and had just never left.

“What about it do you like so much?” she asked and he laughed.

“You can't tell it here.” He swept his hand in an arc across the balcony. His hand stopped by a hibiscus flower and, as an afterthought, he reached over the railing and picked it with some difficulty. “But the countryside is beautiful. It is very real.” As a

joke, she asked if the flower he held wasn't real and was surprised when he said that no, it wasn't. He told her how real hibiscus flowers have no scent; all the flowers she saw, including this one, were bred to smell dull and sweet. "Nothing is real in the city," he said. "The flowers and restaurants and people all look the way tourists expect them to look. When I leave you, I will go to a ranch on the other side of that mountain." He pointed out the peak to her. "It is a real place." Hayden didn't know there were ranches in Hawaii.

Another day, when he asked her how she and Ben met, she couldn't bring herself to tell him that it was while Ben was married to someone else. Or how she had seen this as a simple fact of Ben, like brown hair or a nice smile. She said only that they had met in school and Ben was divorced. It was true enough.

"I didn't think the girl was yours," was all Hamuraka said. He smiled, as if this were some private joke between them, and went inside to order tea.

When he came out again, he was carrying a tray. He put honey in Hayden's tea—local honey was good for overcoming allergies, he said—and began a story about Hawaii: a native boy that Captain Cook took to England where he was socialized and educated as English, then sent back to Hawaii five years later.

"What happened to him?" She felt she was supposed to ask. She was feeling very tired.

"They met a few years later. On a return voyage." He was helping her up now, steering her inside. "He rowed out to their ship and greeted them wearing traditional ceremony dress, and when they asked him how his return was, how he was being

received and all that, he said everything was honky dory.” Hamuraka held his hands up when he said “honky dory,” a phrase that was neither the Hawaiian boy’s nor his own. “But Cook thought his nose had been broken.”

Hayden sank down onto the bed. “So what am I supposed to do with that?” She doesn’t know if she said it out loud or only thought it. Either way, he hadn’t given her an answer.

The photos are tucked away inside an envelope. If there was a letter with it, it has been lost. It is addressed to their old place, the apartment where they were staying while the renovations were being done to this house—the little Victorian place on the hill. Hayden had fallen in love with it and she knows that the place has been built for her: the industrial-sized kitchen, the woodburning fireplace, views of the lake from every room. There have been so many add-ons that the place has become unrecognizable, even the wrap around porch that Hayden loved most had to be torn down and rebuilt. And when it was all over and everyone had to be paid, she had driven home early from a weekend in Chicago and opened the bill, sitting on the new living room floor and unable to write a check for that much money. Eventually Ben had come home and done it himself. His father had invented a nutritional supplement when Ben was in high school and made a fortune. When the father died there was only more money. Hayden was glad he hadn’t been younger when he got rich.

*

She drives to work alone, down the hill and through town. Normally she and Ben drive together. They both began as civil engineers, becoming more and more specialized

until he was a structural engineer and she worked at the water treatment plant. Now that she is driving, she doesn't have time to look out the window, to notice for the millionth time that Ben's name—her name, too—is perched on the wall of the children's hospital, the stadium.

There is a piece on NPR about Michael Jackson's estate, but still no mention of the moon. Hayden has been looking for it, scouring headlines and flipping between news stations for any reference to the moon. Ben has been gone for three days and she is starting to wonder if the whole thing is real, if maybe he isn't having an affair or going crazy.

At work there is an e-mail from the chamber of commerce people. They are concerned about the reports of water activity, which has been erratic lately, but only slightly. Ludington is a beach town and the chamber of commerce people want to know what will happen if there is less beach come summer? No beach at all?

*

Sara calls a few nights later while Hayden is eating dinner in front of the TV. She is in college now, on the east coast and closer to her mother. "Where's Dad?" she asks and for a moment Hayden feels privileged at the thought that Ben might have not mentioned anything to her at all. Then she realizes that of course Sara knows her father is abroad, she just doesn't know exactly where. Hayden doesn't know either.

"The last time I talked to him, he was in Toronto," Hayden offers. Sara thanks her, makes small talk for a few minutes—she has learned to be polite, especially when she doesn't feel like it—and hangs up.

This is what it will be like when Ben dies, Hayden thinks. Sara will be distant and polite and the house will be so silent. She takes her plate into the kitchen and washes it in the sink. The phone rings and she knows it is Ben before she answers it.

“Hi,” she says, the plate still dripping in her hand.

“Hi,” he says. “I’m in Brussels. Have you ever been?” She hasn’t and he tells her about the frites sold on street carts, they are fried twice and served in paper cones with mayonnaise. People buy them in the street and then eat them in bars.

“Great,” she says, pushing open the patio door. “Bring some home with you.” The door is heavy and opens silently. The only sound it makes is the solid click as it closes.

“I don’t know when I’ll be home,” she hears him say. There is some music in the background. It could be Brussels or anywhere else.

“The moon doesn’t look any bigger,” she says. It is about half full and she can’t tell if it’s waning or waxing. She has never kept track before. Hayden holds the plate up at arm’s length. It blocks out the moon completely. “Are you sure it’s going to land?”

“I think it looked bigger,” Ben says. He had seen the same moon hours earlier.

“You never look at the sky,” she says.

“Yes I do.” She imagines his face, pink now, raised upward.

*

In the morning, the moon’s approach is all over the news. Hayden listens to the radio broadcast in the bathroom while she fills the coffeemaker carafe at the sink, thinking how this would disgust Ben, how he would at least buy a water filter. The announcer is very calm and there is no discussion of what would happen should the moon

slam into the earth, the worst-case-scenario sort of things. There is only talk of Turkey, the new projected landing spot, and all the things there that stand to be squashed by the moon.

Hayden leaves the radio on as she leaves for work. She has taken down Ben's *Guernica*. There is only a blank wall that she passes now. It is relief that she feels from the blankness and the fact that the rest of the world knows about the moon. It pleases her that she is dressed and full of coffee without ever passing through the kitchen.

At work she checks her e-mail: more from the chamber of commerce people, as well as the maintenance crew at Epworth, a gated community on the lake. Hayden had sent notices out a week ago, asking about the distance between the water and the structures. They are just now responding with an added note about flooded basements. The lake is definitely rising and the houses are too close. By noon, Hayden is in Epworth, helping to build a wall of sandbags on the beach.

There are only a few people who live in Epworth year round. Most residents are wealthy out-of-towners who only come for the summer. Hayden remembers resenting them as a kid, waiting on tables of Members Only jackets who called her Townie. She thinks that she would feel differently about them now that she is rich, too. Though maybe not. Anyway, it is February so none of them are here now and she is able to like the place for the place itself: twisting roads under thick fur trees that lead to old houses on the beach and larger, newer ones dotting the hill.

One of the men helping to fill sandbags is Clyde. He is a chemist who teaches a few classes at the community college. He is one of the few people who lives in Epworth

all year in a tiny house that his grandfather built years and years ago. “I think he had ties to the lumber barons,” he tells her as they carry another bag and set it into place.

She guesses that Clyde is in his sixties. The work doesn’t seem to tire him at all, though Hayden knows she will be sore the next day. He tells her about the house he lives in now: the hand-planked floors, the intricate woodwork of the eaves. It sounds about the size of the house she grew up in, but nicer and without kids messing it up.

*

One Saturday, after stacking sandbags in Epworth, Hayden comes home early to meet the movers from the art museum. They are here to pick up Ben’s *Guernica*. It isn’t a wonderful painting, but Hayden has made a donation to the museum and they can’t very well accept the money without taking the painting as well.

“Is this it?” one of the men asks after the painting has been loaded. He doesn’t look at her, but the house. He leans his head back to take it all in.

“No,” says Hayden. “There are a few more.” And she takes them into the living room where they wrap up a yellow abstract thing that Ben bought at an auction when he was drunk. They also take a sculpture that looks like a chair (but isn’t) and a set of smaller sculptures made from scrap metal.

She pours herself a glass of wine and asks the movers if they would like any. When they say no, she sits on the arm of the sofa to watch them wrap blankets around each little part, carrying each piece away one-by-one. They are very careful.

“This is a nice place,” the man tells her before they leave.

“Yeah,” she says, looking around. It seems huge to her now. She must be a little drunk, but the man doesn’t seem to notice. He nods, looks around. “I miss my old apartment: everything all in the same space.”

“Yeah,” he says. “Zen, huh?”

“It isn’t Zen,” she says. “I think that’s something different.”

“But simpler,” the man offers.

“Simpler.” She clicks her wine glass against his clipboard.

*

“Did you write a check for six thousand dollars?” Ben asks when he calls on Monday. He has been gone for over a month now.

“It’s for the museum,” she says and listens for his slow exhale, the sign that he’s actually mad. It doesn’t come.

“Tell me first next time, ok?” is all he says. Then he tells her about Haiti, the Citadelle La Ferriere, how he can see Cuba from the top of it.

“How much longer?” Hayden asks.

“A month,” Ben says. “Tops.”

“I didn’t sign up for this,” she says.

When they hang up, she steps outside and holds a plate up to the moon again. The plate is enough to cover it up, but just barely.

*

Next, Hayden makes a donation to the Salvation Army. The numbers almost make her giddy, writing them out, signing her name.

There is little news about the moon anymore. The topic comes up occasionally, but only to say that the estimated landing spot has changed again.

When the movers come, this time for the furniture, she has cold beer ready for them. She even drinks with them after they pack up the table from Italy, the uncomfortable leather bench that Ben calls a sofa.

Sara calls for the first time in a month to say that she still wants her things, not to give away her clothes.

“Come pick up what you want,” says Hayden. She writes checks for larger and larger amounts to charities and foundations. One Saturday she watches television all day and writes checks, one after the other, to the agencies with ads of starving orphans in Africa. She feels freer, like she is becoming a better person.

Ben has stopped asking about money and she doesn't volunteer information. Instead, he spends hours telling her about the structure he is designing and redesigning. “It looks like a giant ice cream cone,” he says. “Only more shallow.” He sometimes forgets that she is an engineer, too.

“Will that work?” she asks. “Will it hold the moon?”

“It'll work,” he says.

*

The only part of the house that she occupies now is the bedroom, the study, and the bathroom. The other rooms, mostly empty now, seem unnecessary: the ceilings are too high, there are too many appliances. The whole place is too much. Clyde laughs when

she tells him this. They have begun to have coffee with on Sundays now that the sandbag barrier is finished.

“Stay at my place,” he says. “I’m going to take care of my sister—she’s just had an operation—and I need someone to watch my plants.”

His house is halfway up the hill. It is smaller than her own, but lovelier, she thinks. She likes the exposed beams, the way they are carved to fit together.

“It’s called dovetailing,” Clive tells her on his way out the door. “It’s a woodworking technique, a sign of quality.”

The views of the lake are almost as good as her own house, though there is no bluff to scale down. She can just walk down the hill to the beach. It is early May and people are starting to filter into their cottages, to clean them out and make noise. They walk their dogs in the evenings.

Hayden begins to play tennis with a group of women who drink gin and tonics. Marie and Zaga have husbands in Chicago and Lansing and Debra is divorced. It is like something out of the fifties, Hayden thinks, invisible men making invisible money. All they need is red lipstick and full skirts. She doesn’t talk about Ben and they seem to think she is a widow.

When Ben goes to Scotland she receives a bundle of text messages. Most of them are sweet things: *Love you; I miss pizza night; you would love Peru*. But there are darker messages, too: *might just stay in Cambodia forever; the moon will never get here*. He has been moved seventeen times in the last four months.

*

It is June and Ben is somewhere in Australia when Hayden is walking with Marie. They have just won a game against Zaga and Debra and Hayden has been sweating enough to be chilled now that the sun is going down. It is a pleasant way to end the day, she thinks. They pass a cottage on the beach for rent: it is tiny, a saltbox, and Hayden decides to take it. Marie sends her son to help Hayden move, but this doesn't take long. She has very few things now.

Sara comes to visit her. Really, she has come for her things, but they both call it a visit. Hayden has forgotten exactly how old she is, but figures it is safe to serve wine with dinner and they sit outside on the deck to the sound of the lake. Hayden has suggested a late dinner, hoping to hide the sandbag barrier from Sara's view, but the moon is slightly brighter now. They can see all the way down to the water.

The house is smaller than Sara's apartment and the furniture is mismatched. She must think it's a dump, though she doesn't say so.

"Did you find your things alright?" Hayden asks, pouring more wine for each of them.

"Hard to not to," says Sara. She pushes a leaf of lettuce out of the way with her fork and spears a tomato. Zaga grows tomatoes and sometimes gives them away.

"There's hardly anything left."

"I'm paring down," says Hayden. She watches Sara as she says, "I'm putting the house up for sale."

"Are you going to start doing yoga at sunrise?" Sara smiles.

She has become charming, Hayden thinks of her stepdaughter. She feels a small pride in this. “Maybe,” she says.

“My mother thinks you’ve lost your mind,” Sara says quietly. She puts the tomato in her mouth and chews slowly.

Hayden smiles. “Maybe,” she says again. “What do you think?”

“‘Who cares’ is what I think,” Sara says, picking up her wine glass and swirling it around. “What does Dad say? Where is he? Have you heard from him?”

Of course Ben is angry when she tells him. He actually yells about the money, all that money that has just disappeared. Where will they live? How will they live? And Hayden tells him about the little beach house she occupies now. It will be November and he will be back in Haiti when she tells him about the apartment in town. He will be in New Guinea when he hears of the apartment after that.

HOW TO LAND THE HINDENBURG

Arlen drives her to the flight station. He is sad but not apologetic. Like it's too bad they can't make things work. They can make things work, actually. They have been through this and what it comes down to is a matter of pride. It is like that with men, Anna thinks. She embarrassed him when she panicked and left like that. And it's not that he didn't want her back, but he knew how it would look.

"It is not a first class cabin," he says. "I hope it is ok." Arlen purchased the zeppelin ticket for her. He figured she would return to America and, now that she doesn't have to hang around Frankfurt for him, Anna might as well. She doesn't know what else to do with herself, so she has secured a job as a chemist's assistant somewhere outside New York.

"Yes, it's fine," Anna says.

"It's exciting, isn't it?" Arlen says.

"Christ," Anna says. It actually hasn't occurred to her that people will be excited about floating over the ocean like this. But of course they are. She also knows how much the tickets cost and can't imagine how Arlen afforded it. He will have to cut back for a while, maybe even sell his car. But then that is what he wants, to suffer a little.

This is when the car rounds a corner, moving past a wall of trees, and it takes a moment for Anna to realize that it is not a mountain on the other side of this hill. It is the blimp, huge and gray and shining.

An *oh* escapes Arlen. He can't help but be thrilled. Anna doesn't say anything. She is fascinated, frightened.

It takes another few minutes to reach the station and now Arlen acts like a gentleman. He opens the door for her. He takes her hand to help her out. He doesn't squeeze her shoulder as she moves by him, though he hasn't done that in a while. "Let me," he says when she moves to pick up her trunk. She only has the one and she lets him do this thing for her. He even starts to stand in line with her until she tells him to stop it.

"Just go. You should go now," she says.

"Yes," he says. "Ok." He kisses her, a thing he hates doing in public. It is a hard kiss.

"This is really what you want?" she says as he stands back. He is looking at her face now. "It's a choice, you know."

"Ok," he says. Then he turns around and walks away until he is not Arlen in a double-breasted trench coat, but a small gray rectangle that is Arlen. The man behind Anna touches the small of her back and walks her forward toward the front of the line.

*

Boarding the LZ 129 Hindenburg goes like this: everyone's luggage is opened up and rifled through and anything that might cause a spark has to go. Anna loses her cream colored jacket, the flannel one that was a going away present from the neighbor who didn't speak English. She must also give up a scarf that she bought at the train station. The scarf was red and pretty and useful when she was cold. She is usually cold, though she doesn't care about these losses. No one seems to mind either; they understand that certain conditions must be met in order to fly over the ocean like this. They are feeling privileged, communal, willing to play by the rules.

Next is the pat down search, which does not seem to have been thought out very well. All the female employees are already onboard, doing female employee things, so the women—there are about fifteen of them—must be searched by men. The man to search Anna is a blonde boy, one who only feels her knees, back and elbows. As he is doing this, she makes a joke and he actually stops to look her in the eye, to listen to the punch line: something about a dog that can speak. It involves barking. This isn't a very good joke, but the boy laughs anyway. Why is everyone so fucking polite? she wants to say.

Once on board, Anna finds her cabin. It is on B Deck: 2nd class. She has been prepared for it to be tiny and it is: just two bunks along a wall, hardly enough space to turn around. No en suite bathroom. But this is not about comfort. This is about flight. Anna has arranged to room with another woman, a friend's sister she has never met, but this woman isn't here yet. So Anna claims the higher bunk by laying her purse on it. She doesn't have much else, just the one trunk, and even that isn't full.

She reapplies her lipstick, then explores the ship, which is as glamorous as advertised: pianos covered in pigskin, a double-sealed and pressurized smoking room. There is a dining room and a writing room and a promenade with windows that angle outward, all the better to see the ground from so high up. There are lots of people on the promenade, trying not to look anxious as they peer outside. They have not yet lifted off so there is not much to see: the ground is immediate, blades of grass pressed against the low edges of the window.

“Any minute now,” says a man at Anna’s elbow. And she gives him a polite smile, hoping he won’t attempt conversation. She wants to be both airborne and to stay in Germany forever. Taking off will mean that she won’t see Arlen again. This seems ridiculous. His face has been a fact of her life for five years now, as regular and lovely as Sunday morning. As for her leaving, she’s not even sure it was Arlen that she was leaving. It was everything else: the stupid wedding, all that fuss over a dress and a cake. Of course this was a mistake. It is the thing she wishes she could undo.

A man with a tray of cocktails, something with gin in it, walks by. It is the same boy, the blonde one, who performed the pat down earlier. “The dog lady,” he says, as if pleasantly surprised to see her. “Hello.”

“That’s me,” Anna says. “The dog lady.”

The boy repeats her punch line, his barks bright and sharp. Some of the other passengers look at them then look away and this is what makes him laugh. He hands her a drink without asking if she wants one and walks away, barking.

And then: “Here we go!” It happens slowly—smoother than she had thought. The chandelier sways just a little, the refracted light shifts on the wall, then returns to normal and Anna only knows that she is not where she was before. They rise and rise and all she can do is watch as the houses and churches and her favorite park—all of Frankfurt—become small, then Germany, then the south of lovely Switzerland, every familiar thing shrinking to a tiny version of itself. She imagines a tiny Arlen, sitting in the tiny Klosterhof, eating one of the tiny bland meals he’d come to love. Smaller, she thinks. Get smaller. But he doesn’t.

It seems that the glass of the window in front of her isn't glass, but a fluid held in place, quivering slightly. This is how her skin feels, quivering and penetrable and translucent. She feels it must be visible, this quiver, but of course it can't be. Her skin is just skin. This is why, when the boy brings her another drink, she asks for a lemon: something sharp, like a pinch.

"You want a wedge?" the boy asks. "For your drink?" His perfect, service smile doesn't alter at all when she says no, she wants the whole thing and he brings it to her in his hand, a bright yellow ball in a clean white glove. It is lovely, she thinks, and she bites right through the skin, feels the spray, the bitterness that swells at the back of her tongue. It is the only thing she focuses on.

When she finally returns to her room, it is dark and Anna is tired and a little drunk. She doesn't feel like meeting her roommate, who is sitting on the lower bunk, writing a letter. "Hello. I'm almost done," she says to Anna without looking up. The woman is very pretty, prettier than Anna, with a smiling face, hair almost black. And her luggage is everywhere, several trunks and a stack of brightly colored boxes against the wall. Anna, for lack of something better to do, takes everything out of her purse, then puts it back in. The woman makes a few finishing marks on the letter, folds it, and stands up. "I'm Greta," she introduces herself in English, though her accent is very thick. Anna shakes her hand.

They decide to have dinner together. Anna isn't very hungry, but it is the right gesture to make and she and Greta walk down the narrow corridor to the dining room. Anna can't seem to manage a straight line. "I'm sorry," she says. "I must be a bit drunk."

“Then you should eat something,” is all Greta says.

Tonight they are serving venison and mashed potatoes with lots of butter. Greta makes a show of enjoying the food, telling Anna about similar foods and the places where she ate them: whipped potatoes in the French countryside, reindeer steaks in Russia. Anna finds this a relief, almost charming. It is also a relief that Greta does most of the talking. Aside from her travels, Anna learns that Greta is engaged to a man in Massachusetts; they will be married soon after she arrives. She calls him Richard and shows Anna his photograph. “Very handsome,” says Anna, which is true. This pleases Greta and she talks on and on about meeting Richard, getting engaged, the business he is building in America. Of course she is retelling a story that is told all the time, but her details are what interests Anna: the wedding will be in a chapel that Richard claims is very sweet and quaint; the house they will live in is a blue Cape Cod with a widow’s walk. It is a lovely life, all planned out. Greta twists her ring as she talks, thanks the waiters who keep refilling her coffee.

“And what about you?” Greta asks when her dessert arrives. “Are you married? Do you have anyone?”

“No,” says Anna. It is the first time she has had to answer the question in this way. Greta says some polite thing about how pretty Anna is, how she will break hearts in America.

**

The trip takes three days, but these go slowly. Anna naps, reads, naps some more. There are books in the writing room that she picks through and settles on the biography

of a French mathematician, Evariste Galois. The man invented Group Theory, which, as far as Anna can tell, has something to do with abstract algebra. Whatever this is, the particulars of the idea don't interfere with the details of the man's life, his childhood and work, his early and dramatic death in some shady duel. If he had a love life, it isn't mentioned. Anna has secreted a few more lemons from the same boy. She waits until she is alone to eat them.

Meanwhile, Greta is in and out of the room. On the first morning, she slides the door open and tiptoes in, looking for a particular hat. "I don't know why I care," she laughs, opening box after box. She has lots of hats. "It's not like I have to impress anyone." Still, it must be the right hat: a pert, angled thing that she ties under her chin. She is happy, even flushed.

"Have you been in here all morning?" Greta asks Anna on her way out. Anna shrugs. She likes reading in bed.

"Come on," she says, grabbing Anna's hand and pulling her down the hallway to the library. "There is better light in here." Which is true: lots of light and furniture that will require Anna to sit properly. No more sprawling in bed.

Greta is off again and Anna returns to her book where the biographer has made some clumsy supposition that Galois, when left at boarding school at a young age, was scarred by the abandonment and became homesick. *He was sad*, the passage reads, which Anna thinks must be a bad translation because it is all wrong. That is not how you miss someone. *And he felt crazed* she writes in the margins. *Constantly anxious, like his skin was fluid.*

“You’re defacing that book,” a man says. It is the blonde boy again. His arms are full of books that he begins to reshel. “I don’t actually care,” he says. “I just wanted to let you know that I know.”

“Ok,” says Anna. She asks him to bring her another lemon.

**

“I’m awful,” Greta says as they change for dinner. She doesn’t wait for Anna to ask why, but confesses that she’s spent the day talking to a man, “a very sweet man.”

“Oh?” Anna says. She’s not sure what else to say.

“We had a long talk,” Greta says, lacing up her shoe. “He’s had a very interesting life.” She is nervous as they make their way to dinner, making small talk until a waiter has brought the soup, the heavy loaves of bread. Tonight Greta does not talk about other, wonderful loaves of bread or the places she has eaten them.

“That’s him,” she says, and Anna knows it is the blonde boy before Greta points to him. He is pouring water from a pitcher into a glass. “His name is Karl.” Karl sees them, waves, makes his way to their table and asks if he can get them anything. His hands are behind his back, all business. Greta and Anna smile, shake their heads no and Karl walks away.

“He’s twelve,” is the only thing Anna can think to say when he leaves.

“It’s just a flirtation,” Greta waves her hand. “Not even that. He’s just interesting is all.” This is when Karl returns with two thin slices of chocolate cake, bows, and walks off.

“Then why do you feel awful?” Anna is sure that at any moment Greta will remember they’ve only just met and tell her to mind her own business, but she doesn’t. Instead, Greta talks about how Richard wouldn’t like it, how she wouldn’t like Richard talking to other women like that. Is Richard talking to other women? Is this just nerves?

Anna is surprised that she cares about any of this. Normally she hates talkative strangers, their self-involved problems, but she listens while Greta lists all the ways her life is about to change: mostly, it is all the known factors: the house in Boston, children, etc. etc.

“So Karl is an alternate possibility,” Anna says. “An unknown one.”

“Right,” Greta says. “A whole set of alternate possibilities.”

“Which look like what?”

Greta bursts out laughing. “Flying around and around the world in a rigid airship together!” And Anna is relieved. They talk about something else for a while: Greta’s sister who arranged for their meeting, which they both agree was lucky. They discuss the dress of a woman at a nearby table.

This is when the magic show starts, starring a man called Hans Herschel. The name sounds familiar to Anna. “He’s famous in Germany,” Greta says. They are sitting close enough for Anna to notice that Herschel has beautiful teeth that he clamps together when he smiles. He does the usual tricks, something with a coin, then something with a card. He calls for a volunteer and picks an elderly man in a green tie who is flushed at the attention. The man is made to lie on a table and Herschel spreads a table cloth over his

body so that only his head and feet are visible. The cloth is long and pools on the floor.

When Herschel says the right words, the abracadabra, the man rises straight up.

“I’ll be darned,” the man says, nearing the ceiling.

“It must be strings,” Greta whispers to Anna. No one can see the strings, but they are all thinking the same thing, all unimpressed and bored. Anna feels sorry for Herschel, who is looking nervous.

“And now you will have to be very still,” Herschel says to the man, unfolding the cloth so that now the man’s feet are covered. Now his head. The cloth is a curtain, straight along the top edge. “Be very quiet.” The man obeys and Herschel abracadabras again. Then he grabs the cloth and yanks it off to reveal a horse, large and brown with one white foreleg. There is no sign of the man or the table. This makes Anna deliriously happy and she claps and claps with everyone else while Herschel smiles wide with his beautiful teeth. It must be wonderful to pretend mediocrity and then reveal magnificence just like that. Herschel is cocky now. He steals a sugar cube from a nearby table, tosses it in his palm, and feeds it to the horse. Anna can hear the granules being ground between teeth. Herschel pats the horse’s neck, then snaps the cloth out to cover it again. But the cloth falls to the ground. There is no horse. There is no man with a green tie. No one will see him until the next day, giving coy answers at breakfast when anyone asks what happened.

On the way back to the room, Greta returns to her anxiousness. “It’s normal to be nervous now, isn’t it?” she says as Anna slides the door open.

“Yes,” says Anna. “You are supposed to be nervous now.” But she isn’t thinking about nervousness. She is wondering if she has really just seen a horse, if the animal had actually been led onto the airship and secreted away somewhere. Or perhaps it really is magic.

*

In the morning, Anna is very tired. Greta has talked all night and Anna has drifted in and out of sleep, waking up to talk Greta down, back to Richard. It happened three or four times and now Anna wakes up to Greta sneaking back into the room, a towel around her wet hair. Greta walks over and kisses her on the lips. “You’re a peach,” she says.

Anna can smell the lye from the soap, earthy and bright. It takes her a moment to sit up. When she does, all she says is, “How did you get a shower?”

“A Deck.” Greta winks. “I know a guy.”

A Deck is for the first class passengers and has the only shower onboard, a luxury that Karl manages to secure for Anna as well. He even sneaks her a new package of soap.

“Thank you,” Anna says as he hands it over. “Do you know where they keep the horse?”

“The horse?” Karl says, but he is smiling. “But, Anna, that was magic.” This is when he pulls a lemon from his pocket and offers it to her. “You eat a lot of these,” he says. “Is it scurvy?”

“I’m trying to quit,” Anna says.

“That is good,” says Karl. He shines the lemon on his shirt and bites into it like an apple, his face trying not to twist. “It cannot be good for you to eat so many lemons.”

In the shower, the soap makes her skin slick and clean and when she seeks out her spot in the library, Karl is there, sorting books again.

“Thanks for the shower,” she says. Even if he is wrecking Richard’s life, Greta’s too, it is difficult not to be nice to him. Anna asks how long he has worked on the Hindenburg.

“Since the beginning,” Karl says and he tells her about the promotional flight, hanging over Frankfurt those four days alongside the Graf Zeppelin, broadcasting radio signals and dropping pamphlets. He tells her about the maiden voyage to Rio, the engine problems, the silence as they ascended higher and higher in hopes of catching a strong enough wind to blow them home and the even quieter relief when they finally did. It is a good story and he tells it well. Anna can’t help liking him.

This is when Greta walks in. She sees the two of them and it’s hard to say which one of them makes her stop like that. “Oh,” she says. It looks like she might leave, but Karl crosses the room quickly, grabs her hand and shoves her behind a curtain.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he says to Anna. “Presenting the Great Greta!”

“This is silly,” Greta says as he pulls the curtain back, but she is smiling. She bows.

“The Great Greta will now appear a horse,” Karl says and he turns to Greta. A few passengers wander into the library from neighboring rooms. Some of them stand in the doorway. “Go!” he prompts Greta, actually giddy.

“Poof,” Greta gestures at Karl, who frowns.

“I am not a horse, Greta,” he says. “Try a dog. Can you do a dog?” And Greta tries again with no result.

“A rabbit,” someone says. And then, “a rock.” And Greta poofs and poofs with no luck.

“How about a book?” Anna says.

“Poof,” says Greta and Anna holds up the biography that has been in her lap the whole time.

Karl holds Greta’s hand up as if she’s just won a boxing match. “So she is Greta the Less-Great-But-Still-Pretty-Good!”

And Anna claps like mad on her way out the door.

*

Anna finishes her book that afternoon, sitting in the dining room while the waiters setup for dinner. They don’t seem to mind setting up the silver and napkins around her and she only feels ridiculous when she cries because Galois is shot and killed in a duel. The book doesn’t say what the duel is over, though Anna surmises it is a dispute over a woman. Before the duel, Galois stayed up all night writing out his theories and poems and over and over, the words, “I have no time.” He knows he’s about to die, that this decision was the wrong one. Anna knows what this is like. The poems are all edited out before his theories are published posthumously.

After this, she roams from one room to another, still sniffing a little, studying the murals on the walls, the dotted lines tracing the explorers’ paths. There are lines all over America and Anna runs her finger from one coast to the other, wondering if it really had

been wonderful for those explorers, stepping into a place where possibilities were not limitless, just unknown.

Greta does not come to dinner. Anna suspects she is somewhere, weighing the known with the unknown, and Anna finds herself sitting with a Russian mathematician who speaks little German and no English. She doesn't speak Russian, so they chew for a while. Anna thinks she sees Karl, his back to her, pouring out ice water. Then he turns around and it isn't Karl, but some other blonde waiter.

The Russian looks at her and smiles and Anna leans in as if she's about to tell a secret. "Evariste Galois," she says. And the man beams. He puts a hand on his heart, then begins to gather up all the silverware at their table. He takes the utensils from the neighboring table as well and the knives and spoons and forks, their handles miniature airships, become the shining edges and spokes of what looks like a wheel encapsulated by a second wheel. The whole thing has axis made of salt and pepper shakers, a sprig of broccoli, any little nodes. First he makes a square and, from his gestures, Anna understands this is a cube, a box. There is an equation that, when cubed, cannot be opened. Then the Russian builds a larger box around the smaller one. He makes the gesture of opening a box and rearranges the spoons that are the top of each box: both boxes are now open. This, Anna understands, is Group Theory, solving one small problem by solving a larger problem. It seems like magic, even better than the horse or the disappearing man, and she claps and claps.

*

Back in the room, Anna packs. They will be landing in the morning and she wants to be ready. When Greta comes in, Anna starts chattering away about Group Theory until she notices that Greta is a mess: more talk about Karl, how they wanted to kiss goodnight but couldn't, how he found this admirable and evidence of her goodness. And, of course, this only makes things worse.

“But what if you gave Richard up?” Anna says. “It’s not just the house in Boston or all the little known things attached to him. You’d lose Richard. You wouldn’t have him anymore.” This seems sufficient, though Greta only mm-hmms. “Richard’s a good person, isn’t he?” Anna says, smelling the lemon juice still on her fingers. And Greta mm-hmms again. “You can’t just leave a really good person.”

But Greta goes on talking about Karl, about Richard, about Karl. Anna knows she won’t get any sleep and sneaks off to steal another shower. This is where she runs into Karl, who is also waiting for the shower. She is surprised to see him in street clothes: tweed pants with a decent shirt and even a hat. He is leaning against the wall, eyes dark and half closed. She wonders if it is the clothing that makes him look this tired.

Karl nods at her, but doesn’t say anything.

“You look awful,” she tells him.

“Shut up, Lady,” he says and she isn’t sure if he’s joking or not. The man in line in front of Karl laughs quietly and shifts his towel to the other arm.

Anna leans against the wall next to Karl. “You’re ruining her life,” she says.

Karl shrugs. “What if I’m not?”

The shower becomes vacant and the man who laughed steps in. Now it is just Karl and Anna in the corridor. One of the bulbs in a nearby lamp is loose and the glass vibrates against one of the metal pieces. The sound is soft and constant, like a spun coin taking a very long time to come to rest.

“I know you are sad, Anna,” he says, leaning against the wall again. “I know somebody died or left you or something and now you are sad. But it’s not the same with everybody. That’s not how it will go with Greta and me.”

Anna doesn’t know what to say to that. “You can’t just leave a really good person,” she says.

This is when the man comes out of the shower. He was quick about it and walks briskly down the hall, happy and clean and efficient.

“I’m sorry you’re sad, Anna,” Karl says. He kisses her forehead and Anna kisses his lips. He lets her do this, even kisses back, then he steps into the shower and bolts the door.

*

Everyone is tired in the morning. Neither Greta nor Anna eat much breakfast. They don’t talk, either, though they do rush to the promenade with everyone else when someone sights New York and they stand there, silently, drifting towards the city, then into it. They glide miraculously between buildings, close to the top of the Empire State building where a small crowd of people have gathered outside on the observation deck. They can see them waving.

It is late when they come to Lakehurst, hours after they were supposed to be there, but no one has moved from the window. It seems that they have overshot the mark and the captain makes a hard turn, very fast. One woman, walking between tables, actually falls. Though perhaps it was not the turn that shook her. Something is wrong and she isn't getting up, even when a man tries to revive her, throwing off his jacket and loosening his tie. It takes a while for Anna to recognize the man, who looks so ordinary, but it is Herschel the magician. He is not smiling now, but his teeth are clamped down. He is working very hard.

Pretty soon Herschel is replaced by the ship's doctor and stands aside saying, "She's stubborn, yeah?" And there are a few nervous laughs until the doctor picks up the woman himself and carries her off, her shoes—black heels with gold buckles—bouncing lightly as they go.

"Is she dead?" Anna asks Herschel. And he doesn't know.

"You're the lemon lady," he says and Anna nods.

This is when Greta appears from somewhere. Anna hadn't seen her slip away, but she must have because she is coming from the room.

"You remember what Richard looks like," she says, handing Anna the photograph of him. Anna nods. "Will you give him this letter?"

Anna knows what is in the letter. It will wreck his life. She is sure it will wreck Greta's, too, but Greta won't know until it is done.

"I can't," Anna says. "It's a bad idea."

Greta isn't surprised. She turns to Herschel and holds up the photograph and the letter.

"Yeah," Herschel says. "Sure." And Greta hugs both of them. She hugs Anna especially long.

"Your life will get better," she says to Anna. "It will. You'll see." Then she walks away quickly.

"She's making a mistake," Anna says to Herschel.

"Is she?" Herschel says.

"Yes. I did the same thing. It was a mistake then, too."

"Maybe it was only a mistake for you." Herschel says. "Maybe, for her, it will be different."

"It's awfully close," Anna says. She wants to tell him just how close, but he is already walking away. And anyway, he may be right. Her life might not map onto everyone else's life. Greta and Karl might settle into a cramped apartment right here in New Jersey. Greta might get a job as an au pair for two kids who she marches everywhere, to the post office, the grocery store, the park. Or they might go back to Germany or on to Rio. They might keep flying around the world.

CARNIVORE CONSERVATION

The Biology Conference was held in the Cayman Islands and Audrey had come to deliver her paper, "The Role of Lichen in Carnivore Conservation." The idea was simple: lichen, especially the stuff found near the roots of American oaks, were a sort of environmental barometer. There were links between the morphology of the lichen and the shifts in wolves' behaviors, their reproduction rates, etc. Her real specialty was in invading lichens, the way they could survive anywhere, take over everything. But this was what lichenologists did now, make appeals to broader fields.

The resort itself was lush and quiet with white walls and plants everywhere. It reminded Audrey of a bank vault. Or what she thought a bank vault would be like from the inside. There were lots of palm trees and orchids, but what struck her most were the mint plants that were allowed to grow all over the place, even between the cracks of the walkways. It was the hotel's logo, a single mint leaf, and the scent of it was pervasive, almost too strong, like the essence of toothpaste was being filtered into the lobby, the several shops and restaurants, the multiple bars, all of it gated right up to the beach. It was like Disney World, pumping out the chemicals that smell like popcorn and vanilla.

After she had presented on the second day of the week-long conference, Audrey walked the beach and had to wade into the water to get around the resort's perimeter fence. There was a guard posted there. "You're on your own over there, Lady," he said as she passed him. He was standing there in his uniform and sunglasses. He didn't have a gun, like the guards in Jamaica or El Salvador. She nodded to him, feeling ridiculous in her swimsuit while his uniform covered him up.

About a hundred yards down the beach, a man approached her. She had seen him earlier, teaching some kids how to weave bowls or hats from strips of palm leaves. He was wearing one of the hats now and walked toward her casually, like he knew her. When he reached her, he held out his palm and Audrey, thinking this was what he wanted, moved to shake hands. This was when he wrapped his fingers around her wrist. “Can I help you?” she said and he laughed. She tried to pull her arm back. She did this gently, to see if he would let go, but he didn’t. He kept laughing as she tugged harder, then tried to twist out of it—a move she remembered from some self defense class. When that didn’t work, she considered screaming, but that seemed an overreaction. He wasn’t hurting her exactly.

“Tony, let her go,” the guard called from the gate. And Tony did, still laughing as Audrey walked back to the resort.

“Does that happen a lot?” she asked the guard.

He shrugged. “Not a lot. But sometimes.”

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Audrey didn’t know what to do with herself for the rest of the week. In other places, she had walked around, gotten lost, found her way out. But this was more difficult. The hotel was intentionally isolated: to the rear was the landscaped beach, to the front was a highway. On either side were more resorts, perhaps more men like Tony. She paid a taxi driver to take her to the places the concierge had recommended, but they were all too clean and too bright. She tried to explain this to the driver. “Where do you eat?” she asked him.

“I eat at my house,” he said.

Audrey went to a few presentations, but they were as boring as her own. She even went to dinner with someone named Chris who her department chair knew. Chris brought several of his colleagues along and they all ate at the hotel restaurant and expressed how pleased they were with the resort, how it was lovely to see another country.

“But this isn’t another country,” Audrey said. Perhaps they knew this. Perhaps they were all just being polite. She scooped up a piece of mashed potato with sour cream and chives and held it up for them to see. “This isn’t the real Cayman Islands.”

Chris furrowed his brow, a practiced expression. It was not unlike Audrey’s own expressions for students who asked dumb questions. “So what is the real Cayman Islands?” he asked.

“That’s my problem,” Audrey said. “I can’t find it.”

She watched a lot of television in her room, spent some time by the pool, then the beach, then back to the pool. She went to the gift shop and carefully selected a postcard for everyone she could think of. She assigned the most beautiful ones to colleagues she didn’t like and to her ex-husband. They would all get scenes of tropic placidity. She called her daughter Mara and kept her on the phone too long.

“You’re in Paradise. I’m in Pennsylvania. I don’t feel sorry for you,” Mara said eventually. Audrey could see her sitting on the sofa, her sweatshirt stretched over her knees. She was probably eating soy patties that were supposed to taste like fish or chicken. Audrey couldn’t understand how anyone could care so little about food. “No one

feels sorry for you,” Mara said. “Go eat some papaya. Go get laid.” If anyone else had said it, Audrey wouldn’t have laughed.

After that, Audrey sat in the lobby, sipping mojitos (the hotel’s signature drink) and watched people come and go. Too many of the guests wore Hawaiian shirts. It was a look she didn’t understand. Most of them—the ones without screaming kids, anyway—looked very happy. She watched a man in a too-yellow shirt talk to the concierge while he made marks on a map. Then the man folded it up and moved past her, out onto the walkway that led to pools and the beach. As he walked, his hand reached out and patted the top of one of the waist-high light posts like it was a creature he was fond of. It isn’t difficult to be happy, she told herself. She felt she was doing it all wrong.

When the sun had gone down and people had finished making a fuss over the sunset, Audrey walked the stone walkways winding around the landscaped jungle. The lights were evenly spaced and the foliage looked wild, but wasn’t. She hid her half-full glass behind a bromeliad leaf.

The path wound past one of the pools with a small bar where the guard from the beach was drinking next to a man in blue jeans and a light jacket. Audrey herself was still in her swimsuit with a wrap around her waist.

“It’s you,” the guard called when he saw her.

“It’s me,” she said. He waved her over and she sat down, leaving an open stool between them.

“Tony got her earlier,” the guard said to the man in the jacket who was crunching his ice.

“Tony’s mostly harmless,” the man said. “You’re alright though, yeah?” He had a slight accent, one that was hard to place. Audrey guessed British, maybe South African. She told him that yes, she was alright and the man explained that several years ago, some blonde woman had accused Tony of assault and he had been in jail several months before it became apparent that it had been someone else, some other black man, who had caused all the trouble. As he talked, he stood up and leaned over the counter, fixing a drink and handing it to Audrey: rum and coke. “But that was years ago,” he continued. “So Tony gives blonde tourists a hard time every now and then. But he’s pretty harmless.”

At some point, the guard, whose name was Chris, left and Audrey kept talking to the man in the jacket. His name was Owen. Several hours later, Owen was sitting on the stool next to her and Audrey was telling him about mint plants, how they had aided in the discovery of oxygen. Or the discovery leading up to the discovery of oxygen. She knew was talking on and on about some forgotten scientist measuring the moisture in the air.

“It’s like the invention of air,” Owen said.

“Yes,” she said. She liked that he didn’t think like a scientist.

The pool where they sat was perhaps two hundred yards from the beach, which sloped down twenty or thirty feet to the ocean. Audrey saw two circles of light moving around on the sand below. It took her a moment to realize what it was: two people walking on the beach with flashlights. It was hard to tell where the people were, but their circles raced up and down the sand, sometimes crossing paths, sometimes both of them shining on the same place.

Owen said something about it being a beautiful place.

“I don’t know, I haven’t seen the place,” Audrey said. “I can’t seem to get off this resort.”

So Owen took her hand and led her into the lobby, through the hotel restaurant, through the kitchen, and out onto a small wooden deck that was invisible from guest rooms or the beach. The railing was strung with red and green lights and there was a picnic table where three of the waiters sat smoking and playing games on their phones. Their black ties were still tight, their white collars were still buttoned to the neck. They looked up at Owen and nodded, then went back to their phones.

“Have a seat,” Owen gestured at the table. Audrey was nervous. She sat down next to a woman who she thought had waited on the group of researchers a few nights ago. The woman was playing poker on her phone. She put down a card in a red suit and picked up another red one. “What are we drinking?” Owen asked.

“Anything but a mojito,” Audrey said. And Owen fixed more rum and cokes. This is when one of the waiters stood, snapped his phone shut, and walked quietly inside.

“New game yet?” Owen asked and someone nodded. He sat next to Audrey and they both looked at his screen. “You know how to play?” he asked and Audrey nodded. The game started and they looked at their cards.

“That’s a terrible hand,” Audrey said and both waiters grinned. One of them laughed. That was when she realized that they were all playing against each other, not some electronic opponent. She and Owen played badly for a few hands. With their fingers, they ate from a plate of pasta that someone had sent back. They drank more rum and cokes. By the time it was all over they were both very drunk and stumbled back

through the kitchen, their arms around each other. Audrey was pretty sure she saw Chris sitting at the bar in a sleeveless work shirt. She imagined he was shocked, watching them make their way back to the beach.

The next night, Owen took her off the resort. It was still early, still light, and he had somehow gotten a car and drove her into the hills. “You know your way around,” she said.

“I do business here.” His business, Owen explained, was maintaining a pineapple plantation in Barbados. One of his distributors lived in George Town and they saw a lot of each other.

They drove through little clusters of towns where the buildings used corrugated metal for their roofs, sometimes even for the walls. And everything was painted the color of a tropical fish: pink, turquoise, yellow. “This is more of what you were thinking?” he asked and she nodded. A goat walked across the road in front of them and through a parking lot. Owen slowed down. “That’s unusual for here,” he said. He seemed annoyed, like the goat had interfered somehow. Audrey could see the animal in the side mirror, crossing the street, its brown fur less visible against the sand.

Owen slowed the car and parked next to a small blue building that could have been a house or a store or someone’s garden shed. He got out, motioned Audrey to follow, and they stood at a window and Owen talked with a woman inside in a language Audrey didn’t understand. The woman used an ice cream scoop to form two balls out of a pink substance from in a plastic container. She dropped these into a Styrofoam cup, added plastic spoons and handed them over with beer. “Enjoy,” she said in English.

“What did she say?” Audrey asked.

“Enjoy,” said Owen.

“What before that?”

“This is the best crab salad you’ve ever had,” Owen said, which may have been a translation or a refusal to translate. Either way, it was true. There were no tables outside the restaurant, if it was a restaurant. And they couldn’t go inside. So they sat on the hood of the car, eating their crab salad and drinking the beer while it got dark.

“How did you find this place?” she asked, and Owen explained that the woman, Maria, was a ballroom dance instructor, that she sometimes worked at the hotel.

When they had finished their beer, Audrey bought two more. “You’re a dancer?” Audrey asked Maria.

“Uh huh,” Maria said. She did not smile brightly for her as she had for Owen.

“What is your favorite dance?” She expected her to say the tango, or the cha cha. Something sexy.

“The waltz,” Maria said. “It’s scandalous, you know.” And she told Audrey about the scandalous waltz, the closeness it required, how this had shocked people. Audrey learned that Maria also worked at the university, teaching dance there. The crab salad business was her mother-in-law’s.

“Oh,” Audrey said. “Mothers-in-law.” She rolled her eyes, but Maria didn’t laugh.

“It is what we do here,” she said and Audrey felt ashamed. This was when Owen said it was getting dark, that they should get going soon.

“Do you love it?” he asked, as they drove down the mountain.

“I do,” Audrey said brightly.

“You don’t,” he said. “It’s ok. It’s not my island.”

“No I like it,” Audrey said.

“I think you would love Barbados,” he said, and told her about growing up in a place that smelled like pineapple.

Things went on like this. He liked showing her places and she liked how dull things became wonderful. They went kayaking in an inland lake. It hadn’t occurred to Audrey that such small islands would even have lakes. He took her to a Moroccan restaurant and claimed that Moroccans ate with their fingers.

“I don’t think that’s true,” Audrey said. She had been to Marrakech, she told him. She had used knives and forks. Owen had read several books about Marrakech, he said, and he claimed that she hadn’t had an authentic experience. They had a debate about this. They had sex in one of the chairs by the hotel pool and by the end of the week he had pretty much moved into her room.

Mara left messages on Audrey’s voicemail and eventually Audrey called her back. She told her about Owen. “Good,” Mara said. “Finally.”

The night before Audrey’s return flight, they went to a French restaurant with red walls and ordered oysters and champagne. Each had thought the other liked oysters, which was not the case, but they ate them anyway, tipping their heads back and grimacing.

“When do you head back?” Audrey asked him. She was making an awful face.

“I was supposed to leave three days ago.” Owen swallowed an oyster and did a good job of maintaining composure. He ended up looking stoic.

“Yeah?” said Audrey.

“Yeah.” He finished his drink and ordered another one. “It wasn’t hard or anything.”

“Yeah?” she said again. She was drunk.

“I think you should stay, too.” He plucked a lemon wedge from her plate. “I think we should get married.”

If he hadn’t said it, Audrey never would have thought of getting married. She would have gone back to teaching reluctant students about lichen in chilly Pennsylvania and Owen would have become some lovely man she had a fling with once in the Caribbean. But now, he would become the lovely man she could have married. And she wouldn’t be able to say why she hadn’t.

So they got married. Audrey was surprised at herself. It was like watching someone else buy an overpriced dress in the hotel shop. She called her mother and her friends and her ex-husband. They all said, “What?” Then they said, “Congratulations.” She could tell they thought she was nuts.

Of course no one could make it for the ceremony. It was too expensive, too last minute. Even Mara, who begged to come, wasn’t allowed. The ex-husband said she had exams and it would be irresponsible. That was the word he used, irresponsible, and Audrey had thought he was picking a fight. They had been divorced for eleven years and

were friendly again, though she was slightly pleased that this bothered him. “I’m talking about our daughter,” he said. “You mess up your own life however you please.”

No one could come from Owen’s side, either. So they got married in the lobby with a handful of the hotel staff around to clap and sign the necessary paperwork. Then they parted ways to prepare their old lives for their new one.

“Dad wants to know about your job,” Mara said as they were packing everything back up.

“I’m taking a sabbatical,” Audrey said. It was the first of many explanations: what would she do with the house in Pennsylvania? How she would see the family she saw twice a year now? She was surprised by how easy the answers were: she would sell her things, she would hop on a plane. What they really wanted to know was if Audrey had gone crazy or not. It was a question she asked herself as she packed, arranged for sabbatical.

“You’re making a mistake,” Tim said as they went over the paperwork. Tim was the chair of the Biology department, the one who told her to look up Chris. He had taken her side on a few of the departmental scuffles and now Audrey felt she was abandoning him. “No one’s hiring lichenologists these days. What if this doesn’t work out?”

“Most people have been saying ‘congratulations.’” She waited for him to respond, to laugh at her little joke, but he just leaned back in his chair and stared at her. “Then I’ll start over,” she said after a moment. “There are worse things.”

She thought about this during the flight to Barbados, the ways a person might start over. She could write articles for some pop science magazine or take up knitting and sell

socks and tea cozies online. She could become a stewardess and argue with people over whether their electronic devices were off or not.

It was good to see Owen waiting for her. He was standing all alone, hands in his pockets, looking at the floor in front of him and frowning like he was thinking about something very hard. When he saw her, he stopped frowning and opened up his arms and it seemed like all sorts of bad things could happen and they'd come out alright.

"Welcome home," he said. She played this in her head over and over again for years.

The house was bigger than Audrey had expected. Of course Owen had told her about it during the Jeep ride from the airport, the headlights only touching on sections of road at a time as they left the city, winding up mountain roads: the place was a pineapple plantation, established by some British tradesman who abandoned it to return to England after one of the first slave uprisings. So Owen's great great grandfather was able to buy it cheaply. It had been passed down. "It's in the middle of nowhere," Owen said. "Just a big old house, but I like it." He had a maid, she knew that much. He had already cautioned her about having places for things so the maid would know where to put it, so no one would be accused of stealing.

His hand on her knee tightened when something ran out in front of the car.

"Mongooses," he explained. He didn't brake.

"I think you hit it," Audrey said.

"No," said Owen. He explained that mongooses are always running in front of cars in Barbados, but they're hardly seen any other time. They're the least likely road kill.

"Not mongeese?" Audrey said.

“Mongooses,” he insisted. He was smiling. She was looking at his face, the way the whole side crinkled when he smiled. Then she was looking ahead at a building lit up like a cruise ship in the middle of dark water. She hadn’t been prepared for a villa, or the fountain in the drive and stables in the rear. A small group of people came to the door to greet them. None of them were dressed like maids.

“This is ridiculous,” Audrey said, stepping out of the car. She was embarrassed by her clothing: a T-shirt with a wool skirt and ballet flats. She wanted to appear approachable, though none of these people seemed at all intimidated.

Owen introduced her to the staff: landscaper, mechanics. The maid was done for the day. “It’s not like she lives here,” he whispered to her when she asked.

The only person she wasn’t afraid of misremembering was Ingrid, Owen’s half-sister. The woman was striking: tall and thin with thick black hair to her waist and a long linen dress. “It’s late,” she took Audrey by the hand. “We’ll just get your bearings and do the full tour tomorrow.” She widened her eyes when she said, “the full tour,” like the phrase was ridiculous. Probably everyone loved her.

The house had been built in eighteen something something, Ingrid said. She had a slightly more pronounced accent than Owen, definitely English. There were two floors, each with high ceilings and exposed beams, all wood or wicker furniture. Most of it looked like something from a travel brochure with wide plank floors and open-air rooms, except for the fabric on curtains and pillowcases: a bright green botanical print so ugly it was almost opulent. There was furniture upholstered in the same pattern. Even the rugs.

“And this is the master bedroom,” said Ingrid at the end of the hallway. It was the same as all the other rooms: dark wood furniture, the odd green fabric. Ingrid crossed the room and felt behind a curtain, turning a doorknob. She pulled the curtain aside and motioned for Audrey to join her and Audrey did, feeling ridiculous at being directed around her own bedroom.

“You can see the whole plantation from here.” Ingrid moved aside so they could both stand in the doorway. It was dark and the world was black, except for a few lights on various buildings. Audrey thought she could smell the pineapple. She could smell gasoline. And someone not far away was smoking. “It’s not great.” Ingrid shrugged. “But the other side is a view of the road. I live there for the time being,” she pointed to a building with a porch light on. “In the guest house.”

They went downstairs again, to a patio at the back of the house where Owen and another man—who Owen introduced as a neighbor, Carlos—were sitting in wicker furniture, drinking from coffee mugs. But they weren’t drinking coffee, Audrey could tell it by the way they held their mugs, the bases resting on fingers.

“You like?” Owen asked her as she sat down.

“I do,” said Audrey. “But who picked out all that green fabric?”

“That would be Laetitia,” Owen laughed. “My father’s second wife.”

“My mom,” Ingrid said.

“Ingrid’s mom,” Owen said. “It’s hideous, but Ingrid won’t let me change it.”

“That stuff is upstairs, too?” Carlos said. “It looks like a lime tree threw up.”

“It’s a reproduction of the original curtains,” Ingrid said over her shoulder. She was standing at a bar, fixing drinks. “She just went a little overboard is all. And besides, he’s kidding. It’s his house. He does whatever he likes. Beer, Audrey?”

“She doesn’t like beer,” Owen said. “I told you that.” Audrey didn’t remember telling him this, but it was true.

“Rum then,” Ingrid said. “They say Bajan rum is better than Jamaica.” She brought her a high ball glass, saying something about proper glasses, and sat down while Owen and Carlos talked about whatever they were talking about: one of the golf carts was on the fritz, the price of gasoline was down.

“And what did you do back in the States?” Ingrid asked.

“I was a botanist,” Audrey said. “I still am.” She said botanist because no one knew what a lichenologist was. She explained that she studied plants, that her specialty was invasive lichen. The taxonomy, mostly. “It’s amazing how interrelated everything is,” she said. This was partially true, but mostly it was what people responded to best. No one seemed to think classification was interesting.

“Like people,” said Ingrid. She didn’t seem to be sarcastic.

“A bit,” said Audrey. “That’s why I like taxonomy, I think.” And she told Ingrid about Linnaeus, his idea of the different kinds of men. Some were mythological creatures: satyrs, hydras, wolf boys. She had told the stories to Mara when she was little girl, even the sexy monorchid Hottentots. “He really believed that somewhere on the earth there were hooved men,” said Audrey, feeling a little drunk.

“Satyrs?” Ingrid laughed. “Really?” She was good with people, Audrey thought, appearing interested when she couldn’t possibly be.

A man approached the patio. Audrey hadn’t seen him coming, he just appeared out of dark. He was a small man with glasses and a dark beard. “For next month, we need an additional fifteen gallons of water,” he said. His accent was not English. Perhaps Spanish. “Twenty would be better.”

Owen got up to make another drink, but didn’t say anything.

“I’ll take care of it,” Ingrid nodded and the man went away.

“Who is that?” Audrey asked her.

“Ask your husband.” Ingrid swirled the rum in her glass. The ice cubes tinked against the sides.

“I almost forgot,” said Owen, sitting back down. He held a small pineapple in his hands. “This is for you. It’s a welcome gift.”

“Thanks.” Audrey turned it over in her hands, feeling the weight of it, the spiny flesh.

“It’s a symbol of hospitality,” said Ingrid.

“Are there different kinds of pineapples?” Audrey asked, tracing the stiff leaves with her fingers. She wanted someone to talk about the white pineapples of Hawaii.

“Probably,” said Carlos. He wouldn’t look at her. He looked into his mug. “But these are the best kind to grow. Easy. Economical.”

It wasn’t until they were brushing their teeth that Audrey had a chance to ask Owen about the man who had asked for water.

“That’s Santiago,” said Owen. He spit into the sink. “I was hoping you wouldn’t meet him until a little later.” He told her how Santiago was Colombian paramilitary. Or FARC. He wasn’t really sure. His division, ten or fifteen people, paid to use the barn. They stayed out of the way. They carried out their drills at night. Owen hardly noticed them.

“And you let them?” Audrey said.

“They pay well,” said Owen. “And my favorite aunt lives in Bogota. I worry they might kidnap her if I asked them to leave. Maybe not, though. It’s hard to tell.”

“Fine,” said Audrey. “But I want a dog. I want something that barks if someone’s sneaking up on me.”

Owen laughed. “That was not sneaking,” he said. “You wait. You will learn to hear them. And besides, Ingrid is allergic to dogs.”

“Ingrid lives in the guest house,” Audrey said.

“Wait a while,” Owen said. “When you are used to it here, we will see if you still want a dog.”

So Audrey began to get used to the place. The house started to feel normal to her largely because it was so ugly. Had the green curtains been beautiful or serious, she might not have begun to have coffee in her pajamas.

In the daytime, when everyone was busy doing whatever it was they did all day, Audrey drove the Jeep around the property. She avoided the barn, but liked circling the pineapple fields and seeing their spiky, green tops in uniform lines. She liked the smell, which was not exactly like pineapple, but something sweet and green. Most of all, she

liked a section of forest about a mile down the driveway that was full of a particularly aggressive lichen. It was right there, next to the road, growing inches everyday and she spent most of the day measuring growth rates and taking home samples. She began to fill a box with slides of the lichen and of the things that it covered. Audrey was fairly sure no one had studied it before. She mailed things off to Tim to be sure and he called a few weeks later, saying he had written up an abstract and had it accepted. She could be first author, he'd do most of the writing, he just wanted in. "It's very exciting," he said, his voice smaller and higher than she remembered. Or maybe it was a trick of the phone.

In the evenings, she sat on the patio with Owen and Ingrid and sometimes Carlos, drinking rum out of a coffee mug. This was the only time she heard Santiago, the faraway shouting, men running in the mud. It reminded her of Pennsylvania when the football team practiced a few blocks away.

"I still want a dog," she announced one night.

"I want a Quarter horse," said Ingrid.

"I want a Ferrari," said Carlos. "A yellow one."

"Done," said Owen.

But the next day, when Audrey got out of the shower, there was a dog in the bathroom. It was a large dog, nearly as tall as the bathroom counter, and all gray. The dog was sniffing around, confused, like it didn't know how it got there.

"It's a Scottish Deerhound," Owen said on the other side of the door. "It was Carlos' sister's. She just had a kid and is getting rid of everything. It's name is Bamba."

“Bamba?” said Audrey. She held out her hand. The dog sniffed it, licked the water from her fingers. “Are you making this up?”

“You can change it,” said Owen.

“His name is Owen,” Audrey said.

“It’s a her.”

“Her name is Owen.”

He was smiling. She could hear it. “We’ll call her Junior.”

It was something else for Audrey to do, make friends with Junior. She took her to the forest when she collected her lichen samples. The dog took off and, after a few hours, Audrey sat in the Jeep, thinking of how to explain this to Owen. It was possible that something had gotten her. Were there leopards in Barbados? Or maybe it was the guerillas. This was when Junior leapt into the Jeep, panting and pleased with herself.

In the evenings on the patio, the dog laid at Carlos’ feet and even Ingrid tolerated the animal getting in her way, interrupting her smooth, quick strides through the kitchen and living room and study. She didn’t touch it, except to sometimes rub her feet on its head or its back.

This was how Mara met everyone, sprawled across the patio. She had just graduated high school, and was staying in Barbados until college started in late August. Audrey and Owen had met her at the airport and driven her in. They had both been surprised by the shortness of her denim skirt, then annoyed with themselves for being shocked. “We’re getting old,” Owen said.

Now Mara was performing her own introductions. “You’re Ingrid. I’ve seen your picture. And you’re Carlos.” She walked around, shook hands as she identified them. She had always been comfortable around adults, something that still surprised Audrey.

“And this is your half-sister, Junior,” Carlos said, rocking the dog slightly with his foot. The dog changed positions and went back to sleep.

“I thought she was your watch dog,” Mara said. It wasn’t supposed to be a joke, but Carlos laughed like it was. Ingrid did too. Then Ingrid was up, being charming, pouring glasses of rum for Mara and everyone else.

“The drinking age is eighteen here,” she said when Audrey protested.

“She’s seventeen,” Audrey said.

“Eh,” said Ingrid. She shrugged. “Cheers.”

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In the morning, Audrey gave Mara a tour of the plantation. They drove the Jeep around the different buildings, around the pineapple fields, and Audrey told her how they only grew the yellow pineapples. “Where are the guerillas?” Mara asked. “Can I meet them?”

“They’re in the barn.” Audrey pointed to the barn, a large structure removed from the cluster of buildings that comprised the compound. “Don’t go to the barn, ok?”

“Does it have ugly lime green curtains, too?”

“Those are Laeticia’s,” Audrey said. She explained who Laeticia was, what changing her décor would mean to Ingrid.

“But it’s your house, right?” Mara said.

“Yes and no,” Audrey said. The place was also Ingrid’s home. It had a history.

“I’m not sure I can mess with that.”

“Christ,” Mara said. “They’re curtains.”

So they sat in the kitchen that afternoon, leafing through a Pottery Barn catalogue at one end of the table while Ingrid went back and forth between a ledger and a calculator at the other end. Currently, she had abandoned the books to fiddle with the coffee maker. It was another wedding present from Owen, huge and silver with too many buttons.

“Do you want some help?” Mara asked.

“It’s just that it’s new.” Ingrid frowned. Audrey imagined that this was as unruffled as she got. Ingrid bent down so that she was eye level with the machine. “I don’t suppose you saved the instructions?”

“Never,” said Audrey. Ingrid frowned some more.

“Here,” said Mara. “I think it’s this one and this one at the same time.” Ingrid stepped aside and watched as Mara pressed a series of buttons. Eventually, the machine made the right beeping sound and then there was coffee. Ingrid packed up what she was working on and took her cup to the guest house while Audrey and Mara tore out pictures of curtains.

That evening, Audrey brought some fabric scraps to the patio. “They’re some of the reproduction prints in my mom’s stuff,” she said. “She was all about the authenticity of this place. It has a great history.” And she told them about the slave uprising, how for whatever reason the house wasn’t burned like the other buildings, how the Englishman had run back to England.

“But they’re kind of busy,” Mara said. It was true: the prints were intricate, too ornate. She talked about the structure of the house, the beautiful lines of it, how something simple would play this up.

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The next day, Audrey was back in the forest, marking the lichen’s progress. She was going in farther and farther. When she returned to the Jeep, it wouldn’t start.

She radioed Owen. “I’ll be there as soon as I can,” he said. “But the Ingrid has the car and somebody else has the truck. I’ll arrive in the golf cart.”

“Arrive?” Audrey laughed. “Who says arrive?”

He pressed the radio button to laugh. It was his polite laugh, the one he used when he didn’t really think something was funny. “Me. And everyone in Barbados,” he said.

So Audrey sat in the Jeep, arranging her slides and talking to the dog. Junior didn’t bark when Santiago approached. One moment there was no one there, the next moment there was. “Are you in trouble?” he said, resting a big hand on the dog’s head. He scratched her chin with his thumb.

“I am,” Audrey said. She wished the Jeep had doors, a window to open and close. “I’ve just radioed my husband.”

“Maybe I can help. Pop the hood?” he said and she did, watching as he made his way to the front of the car. Was he wearing cargo pants? “I used to have a Jeep,” he said from beneath the hood. “Sometimes this thing would just go out. I got very good at fixing it. Do you have a pencil?”

Audrey stepped out and stood next to him, handing him her pen. “Will this work?” she said.

“It will. Thank you.” Audrey didn’t move, but watched as he used the pen’s tip to pry the lid off a canister.

“So what are you doing out here in the middle of nowhere?” Audrey asked.

“Farming,” he said, twisting the pen inside the canister.

“In the jungle?” said Audrey.

“Yes.” He put everything back together and returned her pen. “We were farming in the jungle. We grow mangoes.”

Mango trees need lots of light, but Audrey didn’t say this out loud.

“Try it now,” he said, and she did. The Jeep started fine. He stood there while Audrey thanked him and radioed Owen, telling him he didn’t have to drive out anymore.

“I’m going back to the house. Would you like a ride?” Audrey said.

“Sure,” he said, and then he laughed. “I am kidding,” he said. “Your husband wouldn’t like that at all, huh?” And he walked into the woods.

He met her there a few more times, at first watching while she made marks on the trees and took samples, then asking her about them. She explained the anatomy of lichen, how it looks like fungus but isn’t. She explained the method of taking samples, how to scrape it off a hard surface while leaving the section intact. She showed him how to label each sample and the way the collection box was organized by date and location. Then she told him about taxonomy, how to reduce the thing down to its simplest parts, how to

know it. She told him about Linnaeus, the races of men, the mythical creatures. He had heard of this before.

“Yes,” he said. “I think I am his Patagonian giant?”

Was that a joke? Santi was a small man, and wiry, though perhaps he didn’t know. Perhaps she shouldn’t laugh. “Are you from Patagonia?” she said.

“Venezuela. From a little town outside of Caracas.” He told her how his father owned a car dealership, how he had learned to drive in brand new Puegots. Then he asked her again, what Linnaeus would have called him.

“He didn’t know about South American people. Not the real people anyway,” Audrey said.

“Like I said,” said Santi. “Patagonian giant.” He scraped a sample onto a slide and handed it to her, his chest expanded, his biceps flexed to make her laugh.

*

One day, when Audrey returned with her samples, there were workers at the house hanging new curtains.

“Surprise,” Owen and Mara said at the same time. The curtains were white linen. The furniture had been blanketed in loose white slipcovers that pooled on the floor.

Audrey clapped. “It’s like we live in a resort,” she said.

“It looks like drop cloths,” Ingrid said, appearing from the doorway. “Like we’re preparing to flee.”

“It’s airy and casual,” Mara said. “It’s in all the design magazines.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Ingrid said. She wasn’t on the patio that evening. She was behind on balancing the books, she said, which was probably a jab at the cost of the new fabric. Owen was cheerful, though. “I like it,” he said. “We needed an update.”

“I thought you were all about the reproductions,” Carlos said. He was parting the fur on Junior’s shoulder, he thought he had felt a tick.

“That’s Ingrid,” Owen said. “She’s into the historical authenticity.”

“Well as long as *you* like it,” Carlos said, looking at Audrey who was playing with Mara’s hair, pulling out bits of grass that had become stuck there. Was he mocking her?

“It’s perfect,” Mara said. “This is the perfect place for it.” She looked at Audrey. “God, don’t you love it here?”

Owen tugged on her hair and told her she was sounding like a tourist.

“So I’m a tourist,” Mara said. “You too, Mom. You’re still a tourist. Come on. Get sappy.”

“I do,” said Audrey, sappy. “I love everything about it.” She swooned onto Owen. “Oh!” she said.

And Owen swooned too. “Oh!”

*

The next weekend, Owen went to the Caymans to meet with his distributor and he brought Audrey along. They went by boat and stayed in the same resort, visited the same places. They drank the too-sweet mojitos and ate fried everything. Owen paid too much

for three trays of mint plants and brought them back on the boat. He was going to plant them off the patio, let the mint grow wild.

When they returned, there was a grey pick-up truck in the driveway and two men were loading some furniture into the bed. Ingrid was talking to them. When she saw Owen, she crossed her arms and stood still.

“Did you know the mint plant played an instrumental role in the discovery of oxygen?” Owen said, setting his bag on the flagstone.

“I’m leaving,” she said.

Owen blinked. He stared at Ingrid while she told him about the lichen slides all over the house: between the sofa cushions, atop picture frames, one inside the coffee maker. “It was Mara,” she said. “She let the guerillas in.”

“It was cold,” Mara said. She must have been standing behind Ingrid the whole time. “They were cold.”

“And you knew this how?” Owen said. This is when Audrey realized that Mara had been going to the barn. It is also when she realized that Owen knew, that he hadn’t told her. Perhaps he felt responsible. Or perhaps he felt it was safe enough.

“They’re interesting,” Mara said. “What’s your excuse?” And then nobody said anything.

Ingrid made her way to the guest house. She was angry, walking her fast walk. “And they drank half the rum,” she said.

The two men kept moving back and forth between the truck and the guest house. There wasn’t much to pack. Ingrid actually owned surprisingly little. When they finished,

she jumped in as well, sitting in the middle as the truck made its way down the mountain, a corner of her yellow bedspread fluttering.

Over the next few days, Audrey collected her slides. Most of them were well marked, so organization was not a problem. What did bother her was how they had invaded: the coat hangers in the closets had all been turned around, the handles of the spray extensions on the sinks were held down with rubber bands. Of course most of the rum was gone. Owen hadn't said anything about it, but she knew he was furious.

The other thing that happened was Mara no longer hid her involvement with the guerillas. She showed up to breakfast, straight from an exercise in the fields, tired and smiling. Usually the cuffs of her pants were darkened with mud, though sometimes it was her whole body. She also ate more than Audrey had ever known her to: whole bowls of fruit that usually sufficed for four or five of them to share; actual stacks of pancakes; one night, Audrey watched her eat every bite of three hamburgers. "This is fantastic," she said, getting up for more ketchup.

"This is nuts," Carlos said.

"It's such a relief," she told Audrey. "I hated hiding it from you." She told her how it was wonderful to be a part of something. She liked the running and the drills when she saw them as necessary to the overall goal.

"And what is the overall goal?" Audrey asked.

"Revolucion!" Mara raised her glass, and Audrey was sure she was joking.

*

“You can’t do that,” she told Santi when she saw him in the forest again. He had not shown for several days.

“The slides? I told them not to, but Mara said it was ok,” he said and his eyes crinkled. “It was pretty funny.”

“You aren’t supposed to be in the house,” Audrey said. She regretted saying it that way.

“You let this one in the house.” He patted Junior, rolled his fingers over her ears.

“She doesn’t hide my slides.”

“Ok,” Santi said, still smiling, still petting the dog. “We won’t come into the house.”

“And what about Mara?” Audrey said.

“What about Mara?” Santi said.

“She’s my daughter,” Audrey said.

“My son is here.” Santi shrugged. “It’s good for him.”

“She’s my daughter,” Audrey said again. She wanted to know what she was doing out there. What they wanted her for. Santi explained that she was actually pretty good, quick and smart. That, and she wanted to be there. “It is good for us to see her,” he said. “But if you don’t like it, just say so. You’re the mama.” Of course they both knew this wouldn’t work, that Mara would disappear even more frequently if Audrey forbid it.

She would leave for school in less than a month. So Audrey didn’t. “Just as long as that’s all she’s doing out there,” she said.

“Why do all gringos think we like skinny women?” Santi shook his head, walking back into the woods.

Audrey wasn't pleased with the arrangement, but she was relieved. She told Owen about it that evening on the patio after Mara had said goodnight and headed to the barn. “They paid more than usual this month,” he said as Carlos appeared and said his good evenings. Carlos made his own drink and sat down while Owen explained that he had taken over the accounts Ingrid had managed.

In the morning, Audrey received Tim's manuscript of the article. His take on the invasive lichen was interesting: he didn't find its existence amazing, only parasitic. He thought it should be removed. From there, he went on to talk about the lichen-carnivore link she'd discovered earlier and Audrey stopped reading. “Where's Junior?” she asked the maid, who kept walking through the room, her headphones loud enough for Audrey to hear.

“Maybe she is with Miss Mara,” the maid said, smiling. Audrey was embarrassed that everyone knew that her daughter was rolling around in the mud. She didn't see Mara until the afternoon, when she padded through the living room, barefoot and muddy. She looked liked someone had hung her upside down and poured mud on her feet that dripped slowly up her legs.

“Where are your shoes?” Audrey asked.

Mara looked at her feet and shrugged. “I don't really know,” she said.

“Where are you going?”

“To bed,” She said it simply, as if this were a stupid question.

When Mara was in high school, Audrey had known when she was doing something awful because she acted guilty. She slunk around. This nonchalance made her think that probably whatever was going on might not actually be wrong. Or at least Mara didn't think it was wrong. Or Mara had become a better liar.

Audrey got up and followed her. "What do you do out there?" she asked. Mara wasn't going to her upstairs bedroom. She was going outside, across the patio, to the guest house. Apparently she had moved her things into Ingrid's old place.

"I told you: training, exercises." Audrey stopped in the door while Mara stripped off her clothes. She had gotten so much thinner. The clothes were thrown into a pile of more dirty clothes. There was a flat sheet on the bed smeared with dirt, but no fitted sheets or covers or pillows. Mara wouldn't say anything further and she was silent at dinner. Not pouting or sullen, just silent. Then she stopped coming to dinner altogether.

When Audrey saw her at all, it was between the guest house and the barn. And finally, not even then. Sometimes she would hear Mara's high voice among the whoops and barks of the drills that happened almost every night now. She sat on the patio with Owen and Carlos, listening to the men yelling, all that stomping in the dirt. Audrey wondered if it sounded less like football practice because Mara was in it, or because they had actually gotten better.

"I'm going out there," she said, finally. Owen and Carlos followed her as she made her way to the barn, then to the field behind it. There was enough light for them to see figures running in the grass. Then all the figures dropped and disappeared and no one

would have ever known they were there. Then, silently and at the same time, they all shot up and ran some more.

At first they all looked the same, but Audrey kept watching until she could distinguish the different shapes: large men, wiry ones. One of them was incredibly tall. One figure—farthest ahead, almost to the treeline—had hair that floated behind her as she ran. She was barefoot. She was faster than all the others.

HARD SURFACES ARE GOOD FOR THE BODY

The temperature is only in the sixties—not quite warm enough to lie out—but Karen does anyway. There is nothing else to do. It is summer at The Ontonagon, a ski resort in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. The place is named for the nearby town, sitting on the shore of Lake Superior. Sometimes there are a few summer guests, but not now, and Reid has told her to take any room she wants.

Reid is Karen’s uncle and the owner of the resort. He only bought it a few years ago, right around the time he married Bian who might have come with the place for all Karen knows. She, Bian, was married to Kevin DuBrow for a few months when Quiet Riot was big, to an actor with a Russian name after that, and then God knows what. “The past decade’s been a blur,” she said when Karen asked her once. This may be entirely true.

As for Reid, the past decade has made him tired. When Karen used to visit in the winters he would take her driving on the icy roads of the industrial park with snow piled up on either side. “Give the wheel a half turn,” he would say, all excitement, like a kid about to release a secret. “Now.” And Karen would turn the wheel so that the front end of the car made a perfect half circle and they were flying backwards with nothing to run into but snow. This is how Karen learned that anything could be boiled down to a science.

Of course that was years ago, before she moved to Florida for a job in HR, before her mother died, before she got laid off. Reid wasn’t t first person she had called for help, but he was the first person to offer anything. He had plenty of empty rooms, he’d

said, his voice quiet and scratchy on the other end of the line. He sounded like he'd taken up smoking.

When Karen arrived at the lodge, driving under the pine trees, there was Reid, smoking and stacking crates. He stopped long enough to put an arm around her. His arms felt thinner now, harder. His skin looked awful and Karen felt that he must be as full of self-pity as she was. He suggested she get something to eat. "Bian's in the kitchen chasing some creature," he said. Some scurrying thing had lodged itself behind the stove, he explained, probably the lost pet of some children that had been there a few days ago. Whatever it was had been scratching around behind the stove for the past few days. "She'll find you something."

Bian was stretched across the tile in her black yoga clothes, her black hair all over the place. Like a cat, Karen thought. "What is it?" Karen asked.

"I don't know," Bian said. "I thought it might be a hamster at first, but it sounds different. Like a reptile maybe." She had somehow managed to move the refrigerator away from the wall and was sliding a stick around beneath it without any luck.

"Let me try," Karen said. Bian sat up, gave her the stick and Karen wrapped her scarf around the end of it. She heard claws on tile as she made one swipe, then another, and two little creatures were swept out, pink and strange looking like baby birds before their eyes opened. It took her a moment to recognize them as hermit crabs without their shells.

"Oh," said Karen. Their skin was translucent. She could see the organs.

That was when Bian flattened them with the back of a dust pan. Just a quick tap. There was a little blood from one, though the other only looked deflated and still.

“Oh,” Karen said again.

Bian scooped them up with the dust pan and dropped them into the trash. She dropped the lid and shuddered. Then she smiled. “That calls for a drink.” She fixed two Scotch and waters. That was when Karen decided that she would learn to drink liquor.

Now Karen has been here three months. She compensates by cleaning the guest rooms when there are any to clean. Sometimes she makes dinner, though Reid is rarely home and it is possible that Bian doesn’t eat. Mostly it is a free room.

When it is sunny, like now, Karen spends her days like this: chasing the sunlight around the pool and getting goose bumps. Bian is not far away, lying on a towel that she has spread across the patio tiles. Hard surfaces, she says, are good for the body.

Reid has been carrying crates between the shed and the truck for the past half hour. At first, Karen helped him, but Bian told her to knock it off and Reid shrugged. “Are you wearing bug spray, Love?” he says. This is directed at Bian, who doesn’t answer.

“Just sunscreen and sugar water,” Karen says. It is a bad joke. She feels she’s made nothing but bad jokes here.

“Forget the sunscreen,” Reid says on his way back to the shed. “It’s the bugs that’ll ruin your skin.” Karen listens to him walk away.

This is when Clyde pulls up on the other side of the giant rhododendron bushes that divide the pool area from the driveway. He arrives nearly every day at this time,

sometimes to talk business, sometimes to collect Reid and go into town. The two of them are partners: Reid knows the right people in Canada, Clyde has the fleet of boats, trucks, a few small planes. Karen is pretty sure that what they are smuggling is pharmaceuticals. “Like fuckin’ Robin Hood,” is how Clyde explains it.

Clyde slams the truck door, already sounding the beginning of some dirty joke about the first pilgrims eating cats instead of turkey as he makes his way to the pool. It is his typical joke, the typical punch line. “Well, Kar-ey,” Clyde says. “Hello there.” His voice is syrupy and Karen knows it is to irritate Reid who has become quiet. (The two men are quiet around each other lately. “Like a couple of women,” Bian says.) Karen has her eyes closed and listens to Clyde walk closer to her chair. She can hear him drinking whatever is in his Detroit Tigers mug, the wet sound his throat makes. She has made the mistake of being friendly to him early on. She was brought up to be friendly to everyone early on. This is how she knows her mother was more naïve than she realized.

“Kar-ey,” Clyde says again, a sing-song voice. Karen can feel his hand hovering over her face, just about to touch her. She wants to cover up. She concentrates on not moving.

“Leave her alone, Clyde,” Bian says from her towel.

“Yeah Clyde,” Karen says, her eyes still closed. “Shoo.” She flicks her wrist at him.

Clyde laughs, but he does go away. In a minute, he and Reid march past again, carrying more crates. They do this for another ten minutes before Reid asks if anyone would like to go fishing. “Come on, Karen,” he says. She has been “fishing” with Reid

before. The two of them took one of Clyde's speedboats out onto Lake Superior, keeping the shoreline just visible. It was the point where the lake was most narrow, Reid explained, the shortest distance between Michigan and Canada. "Don't fall in," Reid had warned her. He told her how the lake was deeper than the other Great Lakes, and colder. If she fell in, she'd be dead in twenty minutes. Even in the summer. So Karen was sure to be very still as they sat over the water, chatting and waiting for the Canadians to show up. She almost doubted the existence of these Canadians, or maybe she doubted that things like this actually happened. So their arrival in a low, sleek machine was almost miraculous. They exchanged envelopes and shook hands with Reid, with Karen too, and said a few things about the weather. Their wives were grilling veggie burgers at the dock, they said. And everyone headed home. As a joke, Reid stopped at a stand on the way home to buy salmon fillets. Karen hadn't minded any of it. She even enjoyed the ride, the bobbing around. But she doesn't want to be stuck in that boat with Clyde, his Tigers hats and dirty jokes. She says no thanks.

"She doesn't want to go fishing," Bian says from her towel. "No one wants to go fucking fishing." She says something else in what must be Vietnamese.

"Well same to you, Love," Reid says. Then there are footsteps to the Reid's truck. Karen can tell it is Reid's truck because when the engine starts, it doesn't run as smooth as Clyde's. She listens to them drive away.

It is a soft pop that makes Karen open her eyes: Bian is standing over her with a bottle of champagne. "Cheers," she says. She drinks directly from the bottle, the muscles

of her stomach visible as she tips her head back. She hands the bottle to Karen, who drinks too.

“What’s this for?” she asks.

Bian shrugs, takes another drink. “I have a headache,” she says. “Must be a storm coming.” Champagne is Bian’s remedy for everything, though Karen doubts any of the ailments are real. She doesn’t look like she has a headache. She looks pleased, a little wound up. She gets happy like this sometimes, usually when she’s trying to talk Reid into something. Karen knows that if she were Reid, she’d do whatever Bian wanted. Bian has the kind of will that bends other people, that bends her own body into this impossible thinness. She is beautiful even when she doesn’t care what she looks like, wearing Reid’s giant clothes—perhaps especially then—and Karen is in love with her. She’s never been in love with a woman before.

Bian sits on the end of Karen’s lounge chair, takes one of Karen’s feet and moves the big toe back and forth. “When was the last time you had a pedicure?” she says and Karen laughs, says she’s never had a pedicure. She can paint her own nails.

“It’s not about practicality,” says Bian, taking in more champagne. She passes the bottle back to Karen who drinks and passes it back. “It’s about taking care of yourself. You have to here.” She swings the bottle in an arc, encompassing the resort and the black pine needles overhead. “You’re in the jungle, Baby.” She lays down next to Karen in the lounge chair. There is just enough room and Karen can feel Bian’s stomach against her side, the rib cage moving with her breath. The muscles tense before Bian speaks. “Let’s go into town,” she says. “We can get our nails done.” She holds a hand up to examine the

nails, then holds the hand in front of Karen's face. The nails are unpainted and filed short, little half moons at the base.

Bian gets up and walks into the house. She appears a moment later, having thrown on Bermuda shorts and a button up shirt of Reid's that she ties in the front. "Come on," she says to Karen, still happy. "Come on." So Karen puts on a sundress and a sweatshirt and they climb into Bian's car, an old Mercedes SL 250. When Bian turns the key, the engine doesn't start. She tries a few more times, then curses.

"Battery," she says. "We'll have to take Clyde's truck. You can drive a stick, right?"

"Clyde's truck?" Karen says. "I'd rather not."

"Well do you know how to jump a battery? Because I don't." She says this kindly, patiently, like a teacher waiting for a child to recognize Red.

"We don't have to go into town," Karen says.

"I thought you wanted to." The pout is affected, Karen knows. She also knows that if they stay, Bian will grow sour, that she will begin to favor Karen less. She will let Clyde bully her. It is better to drive Clyde's awful truck that must be full of Clyde, and so she agrees.

The interior of the truck is tan leather and smells like smoke and orange soap, the kind that mechanics use to scrub grease off their hands. The keys are in the visor, exactly where Bian said they'd be, and the bed is full of some of the crates the men were carrying earlier. There are a few more boxes in the passenger's seat and several Tigers mugs roll around on the floor. Bian shoves all of this against the door and sits in the middle,

playing with the radio. She comes across R.E.M.'s "End of the World" and sings along, not missing a word, while Karen steers the truck into town. She doesn't think about Clyde at all, only about shifting and steering and working the pedals. It's easy.

Ontonagon, Michigan is like every other small town. There are a few shops downtown that are still open, some restaurants, and lots of closed storefronts. Things pick up in the winter when the ski resorts are full, though now Karen can park anywhere she likes. She picks a spot right in front of the nail salon and they walk in, are offered Diet Cokes in plastic cups. Of course Bian knows everyone. She introduces Karen in English and that's it. Everything else is another language, laughing at jokes that may or may not be at Karen's expense. She tries to make small talk with the woman scrubbing her heels. Sometimes the woman answers her. Sometimes she doesn't. There is a photo on the wall of a baby wrapped in an American flag and Karen asks the woman if the child is hers.

"That's Quynn's baby," Bian says to her. "Trinh can't have children." She says this kindly, but Karen is embarrassed. She decides to shut up, to just lean back in her chair and shut up.

They leave before their perfect nails have dried and Bian makes a show of walking like a penguin: knees locked and toes splayed. She flaps her arms like wings and chirps. "Is that what penguins sound like?" she asks.

"I think they honk," Karen says. Bian honks. "Or maybe they crow." And Bian crows, indulgent.

“I just have to make another quick stop,” she says while she still has Karen laughing. A woman jogs past the truck wearing bright yellow shorts. “Do you mind?” A man on the sidewalk signals the jogger to stop and she does. Soon she is talking, making gestures with her arms, probably giving him directions: straight ahead, left. The man probably doesn’t even know he’s interrupting.

“Of course not,” Karen says. It is only a formality anyway and Bian directs her away from town, past the outskirts where the houses appear farther and farther apart, and into the woods where everything is hidden completely. The pavement ends and the road becomes dirt, then gravel, then a path. This is why Bian wanted the truck, Karen thinks.

“This is it up here,” Bian says as they approach five or six trailers arranged in a semi-circle. There are a number of cars and trucks in various stages of disrepair, several new SUVs parked in the center. A group of black-haired kids runs alongside. Karen guesses that most of them are ten or twelve, though some of them are very little. These kids bang their hands against the truck. They press their fingers to the window, their fingertips dark against the glass, and Bian waves at them. “This is where I grew up,” she says. She is serious now, humble. Karen has never seen her like this.

When they park the truck, the kids grab the crates from the bed and run off somewhere behind one of the trailers. Bian hands off the crate at her feet, saying something in Vietnamese. Now a few men have appeared and are approaching. One of them walks up behind Bian and waits for her to turn around. When she does, she screams and leaps onto him. For a moment, Karen thinks Bian is attacking the man. Then she

realizes they are kissing, making low, happy noises. While this is going on, a man standing next to Karen plays with his pocketknife: open, closed, open.

“Karen, this is Minh,” Bian says, not looking at Karen at all. Minh is as beautiful as Bian: big eyes and lips and just slightly smaller than Reid, more wiry. He doesn’t look at Karen either. Bian says something else and a woman who Karen hasn’t noticed appears at her side. “Would you like something to eat?” the woman says and Karen knows she doesn’t have a choice. She follows the woman into one of the trailers, Bian and Minh still swaying together. When she looks again, they are gone.

Inside, the trailer is almost bare. There are no decorations other than a cross above the window. Surely no one actually lives here. The woman points to a low sofa in the corner and disappears behind a curtain hanging from the ceiling. When she sits down, Karen realizes the sofa is the upholstered rear seat of a car. She waits for the woman to return with the promised food, listens for the sounds and smells of preparation, but they do not come and it seems that, having deposited Karen in a safe, out-of-the-way spot, the woman has slipped away.

Karen peers out the window and sees a field in the back and a slatted wooden box with something white moving around inside, probably chickens. She looks behind the curtain and sees the door that the woman left through, a few more car seats arranged in a circle and an ash tray that is half full. There are crates stacked along the wall, all the way up to the ceiling. They block the light of the window. Karen curls up on one of the benches. She thinks about Bian and the way her body wound itself around Minh, about the things they must be doing now. She thinks about the people she has loved: three men

in Florida, one of which she almost married, and a boy from high school. She has gone about it all wrong, mistaking comfort for disinterest, throwing away people she didn't know she loved until she had already thrown them away. She couldn't leave them properly, either, carrying all of them around with her, even now. It is the same way that she can't stop thinking about her mother, how she should have been kinder at the end, she should have let her babble about whatever she liked. Instead, Karen had told her to be quiet. "You're embarrassing yourself," she had said. She had thought it was something her mother would want, some preservation of dignity. Now she realizes it was cruel, that perhaps she is a cruel person.

The door opens and a girl steps inside. She makes her way to one of the seats in the circle and sits down, pulling a packet of Starbursts from her pocket. Karen watches her open them, eat one after the other. She makes a neat pile of the wrappers on her knee. "I like the pink ones," Karen says finally and the girl looks up, startled, like she didn't know Karen was there. The girl stands up quickly and walks out, her head down.

This is when Karen realizes she has to find a bathroom. The champagne was a bad idea, the Diet Coke, too, and this is the only trailer Karen has ever seen without a toilet. When she steps out the back door, there is no sign of the girl. There is no sign of anyone. All the trailers are quiet and still, kids' voices ringing from somewhere that sounds far away. Karen walks around and between the trailers, watching windows for movement but there isn't any. She feels they are watching her the way people watch wasps that have gotten inside: stiff and patient. Though maybe they aren't paying any attention to her at

all. She knocks on doors, but no one answers them. She even tries a few door knobs without any luck.

Karen considers walking far enough into the woods that she won't be seen, though the mosquitoes are already bad here and she can't stand the idea of lowering herself toward the ground, all the things that would rise up from the dirt. That, and who knows where these kids are, their voices seem to be everywhere. Karen imagines being discovered, being reported. Then she thinks of peeing. She almost can't think of anything else. Who cares? she thinks, but can't quite convince herself.

She returns to the first trailer considers the wooden slatted box she saw earlier, the one with chickens in it. It might provide enough privacy. She walks toward it, looking around for people. When she moves behind it, she sees the girl who was eating Starbursts. They are both hiding behind the cage.

"Christ," Karen can't help it. "Shoo," she tells the girl. And the girl walks to the other side of the cage. "Go farther," she says, but the girl doesn't move and Karen can't pee in front of her. This is when the screaming starts. The girl has reached her hand between the slats of the box. Karen thinks it is the girl screaming, that she has caught an arm inside the cage and is being pecked, but as she moves to the front of the cage, she realizes it is not the child screaming. The cage does not contain chickens, but rabbits and the girl is making one of them scream.

"Stop," she tells the girl, who does stop and turns to look at her. She narrows her eyes at Karen and turns her focus again to the hutch. The rabbit screams again. "Stop,"

Karen says again. She grabs the girl's wrist and yanks it from the hutch. The girl drops a stick that she has been holding, then holds her hand as if she's been hurt.

"Candy?" she says to Karen and Karen shakes her head no. "Candy," the girl says again. "Candy." It is from the sounds the girl makes, the words formed imperfectly, the consonants loose, that Karen knows she is somehow impaired. The girl goes for the pocket of Karen's dress, then her sweatshirt and Karen pushes her hands away.

"No," she says, the hands are flying at her now. She catches the girl's wrist and slaps her hand hard. "Knock it off."

"Kieu." It is the woman who led Karen into the trailer. The girl, Kieu, goes to the woman, stands slightly behind her and starts to cry. Now the woman starts speaking in Vietnamese, but Karen knows what she is saying: get out of here. The woman follows Karen back to the truck: get out, get out, she says, even after Karen has closed the door. In a few minutes, Bian appears from one of the trailers, Minh just behind her, and they walk arm in arm to the truck. When Bian finally gets in, the woman throws something into the bed of the truck. It is a bird cage with the rabbit inside. The animal is pink and white, a bit of blood visible at the eye. The message is clear: this is you, stupid and vulnerable and unnecessary.

Bian steps out and brings the cage into the cab. She puts it on the floor and doesn't look at it again. The animal thrashes around the cage. Bian herself is quiet as they drive away, blissed out. She probably doesn't even hear the claws scraping metal.

When they are far enough away, Karen stop the truck and wades into the tall grass. She actually sighs outloud. When she gets back in, the rabbit has calmed down and

everything is quiet until the road turns to pavement again and then Bian won't shut up. "I was supposed to marry Minh a really long time ago," she says. "But he had to go back east to bring the rest of his family up here. And then he got involved with the wrong people and we didn't hear from him for over a year. We all thought he was dead."

"So you married the rock star guy instead?" Karen says and Bian shrugs, as if to say What can you do? "How many men have you been married to?"

Bian doesn't resent the question. She seems glad to answer. "Kevin was a good guy. He was charming and fun and everything except for the drugs; then Oleg, who was worse; then Marcus." She makes a litany of men and their corresponding offenses: drugs or tempers mostly. These accounts don't bother her at all. She is detached, even pleased. "But Reid," she holds up a finger. "Reid is the worst." Bian describes how wonderful Reid was when they first met, sweet and charismatic, attentive. All the things they did through this many, many friends. And then they needed money and he got mixed up with Clyde. She explains the Reid-Clyde operation, how the import of drugs from Canada works on Reid's friends and Clyde's boats. She explains how Clyde propositioned her, offering up a larger cut of the profits if she did, and Reid didn't seem to care. "I mean I let him," she admits. "I have that much say. But Reid was fine with it. Fine."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

Bian laughs. "And when Clyde backed out of his end of the deal, it wasn't like anything could be done about it. It's not like Reid could go to the police over being screwed out of all that money. It's not like I could go to them over being screwed." She laughs like she has just made a joke.

“Why don’t you just leave?” Karen says and Bian laughs again.

“I did once,” she says, sliding an arm around Karen’s neck. She seems amused now. “Clyde loved it.” She rests her chin on Karen’s shoulder and talks about how Clyde tracked her out to what she calls “the camp,” where she was staying with Minh. They had a few guns there, but nothing compared to what Clyde had, and so she went with them and Reid didn’t talk to her for a month. Bian’s other hand traces circles on Karen’s knee cap while she talks about Reid, how she won’t forgive him, and Karen knows it is all true. On the floor, the rabbit is very still.

When they arrive at the resort, Reid’s truck is parked in its usual spot. They take the rabbit to the kitchen where Bian puts a bowl of water inside the cage, a leaf of lettuce. “It’ll die,” she says, filling a glass with water and taking a sip. “Maybe we should just kill it.” The rabbit wasn’t for her, Karen thinks. The woman meant it for Bian, who thinks of herself like that: caged and beautiful, likely to die early and unfairly. It is a ridiculous way of thinking.

Bian is caged and beautiful, Karen knows, but only because this is what she wants. She is also ridiculous, a little pathetic.

“It will be fine,” Karen says, and walks away. It might not, but she knows Bian won’t kill the thing that reminds her of herself. She shuffles into the main lobby, the place that looks most like a ski lodge with a big fireplace and a chandelier made from antlers. In the winters, it is all hot chocolate and ski gear. She falls onto a sofa before the fireplace and turns on the big-screen television. One of the news channels is running a story about a small boy that is stuck in the L.A. River. The river is flooded and the boy is

pacing back and forth on a pipe below the water's surface while a group of people stand on a bridge and try and coax him toward them. A woman, probably the mother, is going nuts. Sometimes the child slips and almost falls in. He looks cold and wet and tired. Karen wants to sit here and wait it out. Either the boy will be rescued or the boy will be drowned. These are the only options.

Pretty soon Bian walks in, showered and changed into a sweater and pajama pants with a pattern of yellow stars. She turns on the fireplace with a remote control and falls onto the sofa next to Karen, smelling like dandruff shampoo. "Where's Reid?" Karen says.

"Don't worry, he'll turn up," Bian says. She wraps her arms around Karen again, pulling her head to her shoulder. The positioning is uncomfortable, but Karen doesn't mind.

"How long has the battery in your car been dead?" Karen says.

"Shut up, ok?" Bian kisses Karen's head, her fingers. She changes the channel to a show about the production of Rolls Royce cars. They watch this, not talking. Outside it becomes dark. They can hear the rabbit shuffling around its cage. Eventually, they hear Reid. "Bian?" he says from somewhere. "Love?"

"He's drunk," Bian says. She doesn't call back to him.

Reid walks into the lobby and sits on the arm of the sofa. He is drunk. "There is a rabbit in the kitchen," he says, his eyes on the television. "Do you know about the rabbit in the kitchen?"

“It’s injured,” Karen says. Perhaps nothing will happen. Perhaps they will all fall asleep on the sofa like this.

“There’s a vet up the road,” Reid says. “If it’s alive in the morning...” he makes a rolling motion with his hand. He knows he’s rambling. On the television, a leather panel is being installed into a door.

“Is Clyde lurking around somewhere?” Bian says.

“Clyde won’t be coming around anymore, Love.” Reid takes a sip from a tumbler that he’s holding.

“Oh.” Bian says.

“Did he kill him?” Karen whispers into Bian’s ear. Bian strokes her hair, which could mean anything. Karen can’t imagine Reid shoving anyone into the water, not even Clyde. She can, however, imagine Clyde frantically treading water, begging until he’s too cold to speak. It is a thing she could do.

The three of them watch a technician spray yellow lines on the undercarriage of a car. By the end of the program, Reid’s head is on Bian’s lap. He doesn’t seem to notice the headlights that appear outside. He is only slightly disturbed when Bian shakes both of them off and stands to retrieve the rabbit cage from the kitchen.

“Where are you going Love?” he says, finally sitting up.

The door opens and it is Minh, who says something quiet in Vietnamese. There is a gun, a large one, dangling from his hand, but Bian shakes her head at him. Even Karen knows the gun isn’t necessary.

Bian kisses Reid on the top of the head, smoothing out his hair like someone's mother. "Bye," she says to Karen. She bends down and kisses Karen on the mouth, which is when they hear the pop. It isn't loud and at first Karen thinks that something has fallen in the kitchen. But then Bian screams and then Reid slumps over.

"Idiot," Bian says. She is suddenly on the other side of the room, punching Minh in the shoulder, the chest. It is somehow exciting for Karen, watching the people around her lose control like this. "Idiot," Bian says again.

Reid is holding his stomach. He is telling Minh that he's a lousy shot, laughing a little bit. "You've got lousy taste in women, too," he says and laughs some more. Minh shoots him again, this time in the calf. Again just below the knee.

"Stop it," Bian says, in control again. She grabs the gun by the barrel and makes Minh lower it. Then she marches him to the door. Bian has her mouth at his ear and is speaking through her teeth as she shoves him outside, closes the door behind him. Reid keeps laughing as Karen hands him a pillow and tells it to press it to his wound. He hugs it tight to his stomach, his body doubled over, convulsing in laughter.

"I think you're going to have to drive me in," Reid says to Karen. "I'm dying, I think."

"You're not dying," Karen says. Bian kneels next to Karen as she pries the pillow away from Reid, unbuttons his shirt to see the wound. It is bloody, but somehow Karen knows it is not too much blood. It is not the wrong color blood.

"You're not dying," Bian echoes and stands up. She crosses the room and walks outside, leaving the door open.

Karen finds Reid's phone and dials 911. She watches Karen go as she relates the information to the operator. She describes the injury and the address as she watches the Jeep wind its way away from the lodge, the rabbit flattening itself between two of the bent bars in the cage. She looks outside to see Clyde's truck still there. It is not an unusual looking truck: new and big and black. She could get a long way in it before anything bad happened. Reid is talking about how the business will run now, what Karen's jobs will be, what her cut will be. And Karen listens to him talk about how the ambulance will be here soon. Reid will heal. They will sit together in a boat in the middle of the lake.

PROSCIUTTO

Damian and I met at the Whole Foods on West Huron every Monday after work. We were trying a new thing: eating all week on a single grocery trip. I had read an article about this vegan couple in Oregon who managed it, said it made their lives simpler. The article included recipes I was going to follow to the letter. “Sure,” Damian said when I told him about it. He was lacing up his running shoes. He was always running, running, running. “Simple is good.”

But it wasn't simple. We bought ingredients mostly, lots of vegetables that could be kept frozen until Friday. We cooked every night. It was better than the vegetable pizzas we had gotten into the habit of ordering in, though Damian was often displeased. “No one likes rutabagas,” he would say on the walk home. “Why are we buying rutabagas?” It seems he was carrying bags overflowing with parsley, though that can't be right. And I would explain that the recipe called for rutabagas, that if he'd like to find his own recipes that would be fine. It was the upswing of an argument that would rise as we crossed LaSalle, usually over by the time we got home to Kingsbury, both of us a little sheepish on the elevator ride up, sometimes prolonging the vegetable lasagna to make repentant love on the sofa.

It was a Sunday morning that I came home from a brunch with friends and found him unpacking groceries. He had stopped at the store around the corner, the small one, that had just opened and before I slipped off my shoes, he began to show me armfuls of perfect round tomatoes, small shiny eggplants, translucent strips of prociutto.

“Vegans don't eat prosciutto,” I said. “We can't eat prosciutto.”

“But look at it,” he said, holding it up to the light.

“It’s meat,” I said. And then our voices were bouncing off the walls that we had spent a summer painting six shades of green before finding the perfect one. It was the argument again, the same one but in the wrong place. My voice sounded so loud, I never used to be loud. I avoided those kinds of people.

I stopped yelling and sat on the sofa. Damian stopped too, sat next to me, and we were quiet for a while. Across the street, the windows of an office building were dark and still except for the blurred movements of the janitor walking between cubicles. I watched him stop at a desk, pick up something, set it back down and I thought of what to say next, how to phrase it. That’s when Damian took his face out of his hands, looked up, and said, “Why don’t we get married?”

When I looked at him he was staring straight ahead. He nodded a few times, the way he did when something tasted right, then turned to me. “We can be in Vegas by this time tomorrow,” he said. We packed furiously.

*

“Instead of Vegas,” Damian said as we shot out of the parking garage, “Kansas is closer. And my brother could marry us.” Damian’s brother, Adam, was both county clerk and building inspector of Glasco, Kansas. I had met him twice; he hugged me both times and called me Gracie. My name is Grace.

I thought about the sequin dress I’d packed for my Vegas wedding, loud and yellow, shimmering like a fish. I wondered if I could still wear it in Glasco. “Yeah,” I said. “Ok.” And we sped away, the buildings of Chicago fading into leafless trees, trees

into low fields waiting for rain. We drove through the night, the stars lightly veiled by high, thin clouds. A few miles out of Iowa City, the car behind us hit a deer. “Should we stop?” I asked Damian, who didn’t let off the gas. His hand twitched a little. We had some tacit agreement to hold hands the entire way, our palms stuck together on the console.

“He’ll be ok,” I said. And we watched the headlights in the rearview mirror get farther and farther away until they were a single point of light and then nothing at all. After that everything was flat.

*

It was late morning by the time we reached Glasco and as the houses began appearing closer together I began to look for the one that was Adam’s. I remembered it as a gray house with a black door and a topiary by the entryway, but the drive we pulled into led to a brick house with a bird bath in the front lawn. Damian let himself in. Adam was leaning against the kitchen counter in blue jeans and a neon blue jacket with the Kawasaki logo on the sleeve (he was a motorcycle safety instructor one weekend a month). He was working on a crossword puzzle. I was always surprised that the two were brothers. Damian was thin with long piano-playing fingers, the chords of muscle visible below the skin. Adam had been a bodybuilder when he was younger and kept a few trophies on the mantle. He had gained weight since, but his shoulders were still high and far apart and his face was large and open like a plate.

Adam folded the paper away into his briefcase, hugged Damian. I smiled hello, held out my own hand, and he pushed past it, lifting me slightly with his hug.

“Well.” He clapped his hands together. “Where should we do this?” It took me a moment to realize he was talking about our wedding. “How about that church you like?” He was looking at Damian. Damian wasn’t religious, but he liked the aesthetics of churches, the rise of spires, the way they fit into their surroundings. “Look at this,” he had said several times, pulling the car to the side of the road to photograph a church, walk its perimeters, read the headstones if there were any. He kept pictures in an album that he stored next to his ties.

So we changed into our wedding outfits: yellow dress, blue suit, and followed Adam on his motorcycle through Glasco, the main street a few blocks long and lined with two-story buildings.

The store fronts were painted red, light blue, some were bare shingles. My dress reflected all of it, the blocks of color moving across my chest in fragments.

The Lutheran church was a large, asymmetrical building. White against a backdrop of dry grass. The sky was white, too. There were two men standing outside, the collars of their jackets pulled up around their faces. Adam introduced them as our witnesses: Jack and Murphy. I shook hands with them and they each said congratulations. Murphy owned the Hickory Tree Restaurant down the street; there were plans to eat there after the ceremony. And Jack was a building inspector like Adam. He had a farm outside of town and raised a few cattle.

“A real live cattle ranch,” he said. “What do you think of that?” I said it sounded exotic to a city girl and he seemed pleased.

Adam walked up the front steps and stopped before the two large doors, now he was turned about, facing us. I walked up to the step below him. It seemed the appropriate place to stand.

“Can’t we go inside?” I asked. I was looking up at him from my step. His face seemed far away. Adam explained that it was Monday and he didn’t have a key. I shrugged, said ok, and he knelt to open his briefcase and pull out a few pieces of paper. Then he stood and motioned for Damian who was still in the car. I watched him motion again, more insistent this time. Then his hands dropped and his face fell and I heard the car start up and drive away.

“Well,” Adam said after a moment. “Shit.”

“Yes, shit,” I said. I couldn’t turn around and see the car gone, Jack and Murphy with nothing to do. I stood there watching Adam button up his coat, put his hands in his pockets.

“Are you ok?” He put a hand on my shoulder.

“Please don’t,” I said. He removed his hand, knelt to return the papers to his briefcase.

My phone rang then. It was Damian. He was sorry.

“I’m not feeling well,” he said. He would get a ride to the airport, leave the car for me at the Hickory Tree. I could drive back, couldn’t I? He said “back.” Not “home.”

“Ok,” I said.

“Ok.”

I hung up.

“Was that him?” Adam was bouncing his pocketed hands against his legs. “What did he say?” I looked up at his face. I didn’t know what to tell him: he’s feeling ill, he’s leaving the car for me; he’s gone.

“Are you going to cry?”

I didn’t punch him very hard, but his hands were in his pockets and I guess that threw his balance off. He fell against the church door, still upright like a plank leaning against a wall. It took a few seconds to right himself.

“Christ.” He shook his head and picked up his briefcase. “Come on, then.” He walked down the steps. Jack and Murphy walked after him. I sat down where I was, feeling the coldness of the concrete steps through my dress. Adam put on his helmet and swung his leg over the bike. “Get on,” he said. “It’s only a few blocks. I’ll take you to the car.”

“How do you know where it is?”

“Your phone is loud,” he said. “I heard everything.”

I’m not sure why this made me mad, but I hated Adam just then. “I’ll walk,” I said and sat down as Adam started up the bike and pulled away from the curb. He sat very straight in the seat. If there was a proper way to ride a motorcycle, this was it. It was the kind of thing Damian would do, become a geek about something, boil it down to a science. I loved geeks.

I don’t know how long I intended to sit on the church steps. Spring in Kansas isn’t particularly warm. People drove by and looked at me, sitting on the concrete steps in

my short, yellow dress. They did not seem scandalized, as I thought they would, just curious.

One of them, a woman in a white Toyota, slowed down and asked if I was ok. I liked her face: the pale skin and the bright, bright lips. I made myself say yes.

“Do you need a ride somewhere?” the woman asked.

“The Hickory Tree Restaurant?” I said. “Please.”

“Where are you from?” she asked as I got in.

“Chicago,” I said. “I came to get married,” I added.

“Oh,” she said. “Oh.” She pulled into the restaurant parking lot. We had driven exactly two blocks. I felt ridiculous.

“I just punched his brother.”

“Did it help?” she said.

“A little.” She nodded at this, she believed it was true. I wanted to hug her for it. But that was wrong. I would be wrong at things for a while, I figured. I thanked her and got out.

Inside the restaurant, Adam was in the middle of a plate of ribs. I didn't see anyone else familiar. “Hi,” I said. “I'm sorry I punched you.”

He shrugged. “It didn't really hurt.”

“I'm still sorry.” I sat down in the booth across from him and he reached into his pocket, pulling out car keys.

“I saw Damian before he left,” Adam said, neatly paring the meat away from a rib bone with his knife.

“How was he?”

“He looked pretty bad.” He left the bone almost clean, which I thought must be difficult.

“Good,” I said, not really meaning it.

“Why don’t you eat something.” Adam pushed the plate toward me. I said no thanks, that I was a vegan, and watched him continue to make the neat little cuts and place them in his mouth. “Have my cheese fries then,” he said. And I thought about explaining that vegans don’t eat cheese, but didn’t. I picked up a fry and looked at it, put it in my mouth and chewed. At first it was awful, greasy and pungent. Then it was delicious. I had more. A waitress poured a glass of water for me, called me Hon when I said no thanks to her offers for my own plate. She looked at my bare legs, my yellow dress, and brought me coffee.

Adam asked if I would be driving back that night. He said there was a decent hotel in town, and I thought of hurtling through the dark towards home. I thought of finding Damian and letting him persuade me to get married at City Hall. I thought of finding Damian and stabbing him in the leg with the kitchen scissors.

I had eaten all of the fries and Adam was standing up, paying his bill, putting on his helmet. He flipped up the face mask and looked at me. “Coming?” he said.

“I guess.” I stood up and followed him out. “Are you going home?”

“I have an inspection to do,” he said, leaning against the hood of Damian’s car, ready to open the door for me. “Then home.”

“What kind of inspection?”

“Residential,” he said. “It’s kind of cool. It used to be a missile silo, but it’s been refurbished as a residence.”

“You mean it’s someone’s house?”

He nodded, a little impatient.

“Can I come with you?”

He looked at my dress: short and strapless. “You would freeze in that,” he said.

“Plus, if we fell…” He made a face, shook his head.

“Please,” I said.

“It’s boring,” Adam said. “I just check pipes and electrical sockets. You’d be cold and you’d be bored.”

“I have a sweatshirt in the car,” I said. He laughed, but I opened the car door and rooted around anyway. It was a white sweatshirt with Northwestern on the front in yellow lettering. When I turned around Adam was already on the bike.

“No,” he said. “It’s a bad idea.” He started the engine.

“I’m coming,” I said, standing next to his ear. I put my hands on his shoulders and climbed on behind him. The shoulders felt wrong. They were the wrong width. Adam shook his head, but held the bike steady and eventually put it in gear, steering out of the parking lot.

After the Cold War, the government handed ownership of missile silos to whoever owned the surrounding property. Most of them were farmers. Adam explained this as we drove. He turned his head and spoke to me over his shoulder and I was

worried that we might crash and kept my hands on his shoulders even though it was a big bike.

He was right: I was cold. I tried focusing on the scenery: nothing but fields and sky. It was a little like being in a plane and not being able to see anything other than clouds. Almost zen-like.

“I like it here,” Adam yelled over his shoulder. I remembered that he and Damian had grown up in Pennsylvania, all trees and mountains and coal mining. “I like the flatness and the fields; sometimes you think you’re looking at the ocean.” I could see what he meant.

We could see the house from a long way off: at first a single block in a field of yellow, then the absence of grass came into focus, then the wrap around porch, the cedar shingles. “Looks like any other McMansion, huh?” Adam said, pulling into the driveway. He stopped and waited for me to hop off, then dismounted.

I followed him onto the porch, my heels clicking against the painted wood, and Adam punched a code into a security box by the front door. I was grateful to be indoors, my legs starting to burn the way my hands did when, as a kid, I came inside after playing in the snow for too long.

I breathed in the new house smell. Someone had once told me it was toxic, just the smell of fresh chemicals, but I still liked it. I walked around the living room with a cathedral ceiling and through the kitchen, envying the large island in the middle. I ran up the stairs and looked into the bathrooms with perfectly white tubs and toilets, the bedrooms with tufted headboards resting against the walls. There were a few boxes in

the master bedroom, the owners apparently anxious to move in. They were full of books: self-help, cooking. I was surprised by the book of Audubon illustrations.

“Come here, Gracie,” Adam called from a room somewhere downstairs. “You’ve got to see this.” I followed his voice down the stairs, through the living room. He was in a utility room with a mop sink, hook-ups for washer and dryer. He was standing next to what looked like a large manhole cover on its side. “It’s the original hatch,” he said. I learned later that it weighed several tons.

Adam began the descent into the hole, florescent lights buzzing on as he went, and I could hear his footsteps going on and on. “They’re calling this the command Complex,” he said from somewhere. I climbed down after him.

The sides had been dry walled, but were yet to be painted. Track lighting had been installed across the ceiling and Adam inspected that, the electric outlets on the walls, water pipes in the kitchen and bathrooms. The space felt like a round art gallery, blank and windowless.

“This is where they’ll keep their rations,” he opened a pantry larger than my apartment. There were already several food items on the shelves: marshmallows, Chef Boyardee, Spam.

“They’re using it as a bomb shelter?” I trailed a finger along the wall, coming away with a fine powder of plaster.

“The builder says they want the option. I hear they’re a little nuts.”

“I hear you’re a little nuts,” I said. Adam ignored this.

There were two chest freezers in the back of the pantry and Adam gestured to them. “For storing the dead,” he said and laughed.

“What kind of apocalypse were these people planning for?” I asked. I scanned the underground kitchen: Corian countertops, metal sinks, a mid-scale blender. There was a small microwave in the corner with splatter stains on the inside. Either it was an old microwave or the owners had been camping out down here.

“Mostly,” Adam said, “It’s a novelty. Think: your own hermetically sealed gym, pool, entertaining space.” He led me down a level and I leaned against the wall, feeling tired. I thought about Damian, wondered if his plane had landed yet. I pulled out my cell phone and wasn’t surprised that I didn’t have a signal.

“Finished?” I asked Adam as he stood in front of me, making notes.

He giggled and motioned to a set of French doors. “These used to be blast doors,” he said, pushing through them. “And this is the Main Silo Complex.” He used quotation fingers here. “It’s where the missile used to be.” We walked through a passageway the size of a bedroom and opened another set of doors. The space on the other side was circular and about fifty feet across.

“This goes all the way down,” he said, his voice echoing off the walls. “Two hundred feet. Fourteen levels.”

I made it through the first few levels with him; we walked round and round, then down a flight of stairs, and round and round again. He stopped every few feet or so to check an outlet and it seemed impossible that anything could fill all this space.

Imagining it made me tired and I remembered that we had driven all night, that I hadn't slept in two days.

"I might stop here and wait for you," I told Adam when we came to a small collection of furniture: an old plaid sofa and wooden tables that looked to be from the seventies.

"Ok," said Adam. He checked a few sockets and left me sitting on the couch, my knees pulled in and tucked under my sweatshirt. The coffee table in front of me had two worn spots on the surface where two pairs of feet had rested often. I took my shoes off, set them on the table, and fell asleep marveling at the thickness of the walls.

I dreamed of prosciutto. Great long pieces of it wrapped around and around slices of melon. In my dream, there were hands that were too big to handle the slices. The proportions were all off, but the hands tried anyway.

Neither of us could say how the hatch closed. Or when. I only knew it when I woke, my feet and legs feeling frozen, my mouth tasting like delicate smoke and salt. Adam was sitting Indian style on the floor and working at a crossword. "We're here until the crew comes in the morning," he said, not looking up. "What's a five-letter word for apocalypse?"

"What time does the crew come?" I sat up and stretched out my legs then pulled them back into the sweatshirt. It was very cold.

"Maybe eight," he said, checking his watch. "It's eleven now." I could see his breath. He looked miserable like that, so I shifted to one end of the couch and patted the seat. "I'm good here," he said.

“Come on,” I said. “We’re the last people on Earth. We have to get along.”

“Wonderful,” said Adam. He moved to the couch anyway.

“Why do you think they have all this crappy furniture down here?” I asked. My teeth were chattering. “Everything upstairs is nice.” Adam moved closer, one hand on each of my arms, moving up and down quickly.

“I don’t know,” he said. I was terribly cold. “I don’t know. Do you think this stuff reminded them of something?”

“Glory days of high school,” I said.

“Their days as poor newlyweds,” Adam said.

“The furniture of their first treehouse,” I said.

Adam looked at me a little funny. “I think the environmental controls down here are still kind of wonky,” he said. “Don’t take this the wrong way.” He moved closer and put his arm around me. Pretty soon he had his jacket open and had me wrapped against his chest. “Say more about the furniture,” he said.

I complied. “The stuff upstairs is so nice. Don’t you think that if you planned to be trapped somewhere for a long time you’d make sure you had nice stuff with you?”

“I don’t know,” said Adam, still warming me. “Would you?”

“I don’t have nice stuff,” I said. “I have a beige couch and that’s it.”

“What if you could afford nice things?”

I thought of a plush leather couch I had seen in a magazine once. It might have been a wedding magazine, the bride taking up the length of the seat and her bridesmaids

were feeding her grapes. I somehow got the idea the model was miserable. “I think I might feel that all that luxury was mocking me. That it wasn’t real, you know?”

“I think this would be a really good time to get drunk,” Adam said. But there wasn’t any liquor that we could find.

I think this was the point where Adam looked at me and said, “You are gone, aren’t you?”

“I want prosciutto,” I said.

“Aren’t you a vegan?” Adam asked. His hands were slowing down.

“That’s what our fight was about,” I laughed. “Prosciutto.”

“Prosciutto. Prosciutto. Prosciutto,” said Adam. “It’s a funny word.”

“You’re a funny word,” I said.

When I woke up, I could tell it was daylight. It must have been the voices somewhere above us, bouncing against the walls and floors. Adam and I were still sharing his coat and I could tell he was asleep by his breathing. I slipped out and wound my way up the floors of the missile silo until I could see the men who belonged to the voices. They were lying on their stomachs, installing lighting fixtures.

“Christ, lady,” one of them said when he saw me and I remembered my dress covered up by my sweatshirt. “Where did you come from?”

I walked past them, climbing up the ladder, out of the missile silo. One of the fireplaces upstairs was burning and I stood in front of that for a while, warming my legs and pretty soon Adam joined me, his phone pressed to his ear.

“Someone for you,” he said, handing it to me.

“I heard you had hypothermia.” It was Damian.

“Probably not,” I said. “I was just cold.”

“I’m filling the refrigerator with meat. You’d better come home and stop me.”

“I spent the night with your brother,” I said. I looked for Adam. He was talking to one of the contractors. He winked at me and kept right on talking.

“He told me,” said Damian. “Come home.” He said. “I’m sorry.”

His voice continued to rise out of the earpiece as another man walked toward me, carrying a small first aid kit. “You don’t want to get too warm too fast,” he said, placing his hands on my shoulders and moving me away from the fireplace. “It can be a shock on the system.”

LEOPARD. EAGLE. LEOPARD. EAGLE

What a lot of people don't know is that when Amelia Earhart disappeared in 1937, she wasn't all alone. She had her navigator Fred Noonan with her. Noonan was a stern faced man, his shirt always buttoned to the neck and neatly cinched with a tie. He was Alice's great-grandfather, which didn't mean a lot to Alice, though her mother Lynn had been interested in the disappearance. Lynn was always collecting clippings and pasting them into a large scrapbook. When Lynn's MS got very bad and she had to be moved into a nursing home, the hobby only increased and Alice would scan the articles into PDFs that Lynn could click through on her laptop. So poor Fred Noonan had always been more of a task than a subject of interest to Alice.

One weekend, when Alice came by to visit, there was a man in Lynn's room with white hair but a young face, probably still in his thirties. He was clearly uncomfortable, hunched over Lynn's shoulder in order to see her computer screen that she was pointing at, though he seemed unaware of his own discomfort.

"Hi," Alice said and the man stood up. "This is my daughter, Alice," Lynn said. She spoke through the computer now. The voice was set at English Woman.

"I'm Richard," the man said. "I'm doing a project on Earhart, so I'm interviewing Lynn about her grandfather. Your great-grandfather, I guess." Alice nodded and shook hands.

"He's a liar," Lynn said. She made a joke about Richard molesting her. She thought things like this were funny now. "Molesting. Molesting." The computerized

voice spaced out the word a few more times. "It never sounds right, does it?" Richard pretended to look ashamed and said it was all true.

Richard seemed too eager, Alice thought. Lynn would have given him the articles even if he didn't fall all over himself. So why pretend? "She can't talk for too long," Alice said. "She gets tired."

"She's a liar, too," Lynn said, directing their attention back to the screen. There was something else about Noonan she wanted to tell them, some letter he had written to Earhart. An orderly kicked them out an hour later. "She really does get tired," Alice said.

So Richard asked Alice if he could interview her, an idea Alice didn't particularly like. She wasn't sure if she particularly liked Richard or not, the way he encouraged Lynn's jokes. "I don't know anything about Noonan," she said. "And I have to work." She found herself explaining the bicycle store, how she sold and fixed bikes and bike parts, renting tandems to summer tourists. "Great," Richard said. "I need a headlight."

So he followed her to the shop and showed him the headlights. There were seven headlights. People usually took a long time looking at them, then picking the same one. Richard didn't take long at all. He scanned the display once or twice, then snatched one up. "This one," he said, decisive.

He asked again about the interview and Alice agreed, but made him sit on the floor with her in the back room while she removed and replaced a chain mangled in someone's gears. They sat on either side of the bike and Richard peered through the tire spokes at her while she talked. Noonan was never a big deal to her, she explained, mostly an object of her mother's genealogical obsession. He had known someone famous, might

have even been her lover. Other than that, Noonan himself hadn't done anything particularly wonderful. "In fact, it turns out he wasn't even a great navigator," she joked. Richard didn't laugh at this, but he made the appropriate face: eyes crinkled, mouth turned up.

He offered to buy her dinner after that and Alice thought why not. It was a free dinner and she was started not to dislike him. They went to dinner the night after, too, a play that weekend, and moved in together several months later. Alice learned that Richard was always like that, energetic and decisive. She also learned that he didn't normally laugh. You couldn't just listen and nod; you had to be looking at him to know if he was happy or not. Alice learned how to pay attention to Richard, to everything. There was an art to it.

In January Richard was approved for a research grant that he was going to use to get to Nikumaroro. It was a small, uninhabited island in the South Pacific about three hundred miles away from Howland Island, the place Earhart meant to land but didn't. There had been broadcasts on her frequency coming from Nikumaroro in the weeks after the disappearance and some British officials had found evidence of a castaway there when they arrived in the forties a few years later. It could be Earhart, Richard thought. He wanted to see if he could find anything else.

When he asked Alice to come with him, Richard presented the idea as a romantic one: they would be stranded together on a tropical island. They could catch fish for breakfast, walk around naked. "I've been stranded on an island once before," Alice said. "It wasn't great." She told him about vacationing in Barbados with a friend and how they

had rented a boat to picnic on another island. There were dozens of marshy island chains everywhere and people got lost all the time. They actually expected to get lost. Though they did not expect to run out of gas and they ended up swimming to the nearest spot of land and rationed out the crackers and sandwiches and salads they had packed for an afternoon. They only stayed there a day and a half until they were rescued by the boat rental company, but Alice remembered hating the feeling of sand everywhere. It felt like her mouth was full of it. She didn't tell Richard that the friend was a boyfriend—he had probably figured that much—and she didn't tell him that this boyfriend had proposed when they touched land. The details of other people made him jealous or sad. He didn't like knowing that she had been engaged once.

“Well we won't really be stranded,” Richard said. “We'll have radios and showers and things like that.”

“And a boat,” Alice said.

“And a boat,” Richard said.

Of course Lynn didn't like it. “You're tempting fate,” she said, her computer set to Australian woman today.

“We won't even be a month,” Richard said.

Lynn was telling him that wasn't the point as he dragged in an orderly who was passing by, a Scrabble box tucked under her arm. He asked the woman to molest Lynn while they were away.

“Sir, that's not something we joke about here,” the woman said.

Lynn reset the computer voice to American male. “You’re tempting fate,” she said again. Then she switched to American woman and said the same thing.

*

So Alice and Richard made their arrangements and headed off for Nikumaroro, flying first to Australia and then to a series of smaller and smaller islands until they found a boat, an old cabin cruiser, in Kiribati. They loaded the boat with the kind of equipment and food that Richard had read was good to have on islands. Then they started the engine and drove off. Just like that. Of course that’s how it is done, Alice thought.

“Are you ok?” Richard kept asking her, his eye always on the instruments. This made Alice laugh.

“I’m not afraid of boats,” she said. “I’m afraid of islands.”

It took them several hours to get to Nikumaroro, which was shaped like a reverse and elongated C, a long strip of land wrapped around a lagoon. It was the site of a shipwreck, a brief endeavor in British colonization, and an American navigational site, all of them now abandoned due to a lack of fresh water and, Richard added, “general unpleasantness.” The land was full of rats and birds and dense plants while the water was full of sharp coral, sharks, and in certain seasons a kind of toxic fish.

Even navigating the island was difficult: in order to enter the lagoon and dock, they had to find just the right spot at just the right time when the tide was high enough to get them over the coral reef. The wind had to be blowing in the right direction.

“It’s like a video game,” Alice said as Richard steered into the lagoon, the motor running softly. “You have to play this level just so in order to get to the next level, which

you have to play just so.” The place almost looked like the places of early Mario Brothers games where the scenery is only a backdrop: too green and too blue to be a real. It also seemed impossible that there could be anything else behind all that greenness. It was like the joke people made when someone said, “look at all that water”: yes, and that’s just the top of it.

Richard was quiet, concentrating. “There are still pieces of that shipwreck out here,” he said. “It would be bad if we hit them.”

Alice looked for something to do while Richard anchored. It was something she worried about: not knowing what to do, doing the wrong thing. She had read all the books, too, perhaps more than Richard. She had stood at the shop counter and learned about the island’s history, the things that lived on it, the gods and ghosts that people believed in before everyone left. She had read about inhabiting uninhabitable places. The thing to do now, she recalled, was find the inflatable raft. It was still in the box and Alice inflated it. When they dropped anchor, Richard treated this all as a matter of course: of course Alice had inflated the raft, it was the right thing to do.

They paddled to the spot where the British colonial village had been built in the forties and abandoned in the sixties. Ontop of this site was the Coast Guard base that was established and deserted in the seventies. All that was left of any of it was a quonset hut—a halved cylinder with windows and doors inserted into it—and a few collapsed tin rooftops barely visible under moss and leaves. Other than that, the trees here may have been less tall and less dense than the other trees, though it was hard to tell. It was hard to see ten feet in any direction. There was a lot of green. There was a lot of rustling in the

green. “Probably rats,” Richard said. There was noise everywhere, birds and monkeys and something guttural that must have been a frog or a lizard.

“We are running north to south,” Alice said. It was, Richard had told her, Earhart’s last decipherable transmission. Richard didn’t find this funny. He was actually flustered, wondering what to do.

“Let’s sleep on the boat,” Alice said, and Richard agreed. At least for the time being.

They got back to the boat just before dark, which came early. “We’re practically on the equator,” Richard said, explaining how the earth bulged around the equator, how this affected the amount of daylight. “But you know this I guess,” he said to Alice, who did.

They zipped their sleeping bags together and drank warm beer while Richard told her stories about Noonan. “The team in the forties found some bones on the beach,” he said. “And then promptly lost them.” He had told her all this before. He was restless.

“So it really could have been Amelia and Fred?” she said and Richard said no, there was just the one body. The plane probably crashed on the coral reef and one of them died in the crash or drowned.

“I’ll bet it was Amelia,” Alice said. “I wonder what happened to Fred.”

“Maybe he’s on some other island,” Richard said.

“Maybe he ditched Amelia, sold the plane, and bought an island,” Alice said.

“Maybe Amelia ate him.”

“Maybe the island ate him.”

*

In the morning, everything was even brighter, even louder. The monkeys would not shut up and it was terribly hot. Richard wanted to see Seven Site, the other side of the island where the castaway bones had been found. He brought his sonar device, a thing that looked like a giant metal detector, and Alice carried the shovels. They walked in the strip of sand between forest and water. It was easier to walk the perimeter of the island this way than trudge through the forest.

“I don’t remember reading about any large animals here,” Alice said. “Nothing that eats monkeys anyway.”

“Maybe monkey-eating birds,” Richard said. “Though if I go missing, you tell them a lion got me. A huge one.”

Alice said she would prefer to be taken in by quicksand. “There’s no body,” she said. “They’d have to search for you for years.” So they combed the beach, arguing about the best way to die, then the best way to kill someone, stopping every so often to eat cereal bars or dig up some bone-sized tree roots. The dirt was soft, easy to dig through, and there were very few small rocks in the way. The small piece of shell didn’t look much different from a pebble at first, small and light on one side, dark on the other. “It’s charred,” Richard said, excited. “Humans char things.”

“So does lightning,” Alice said. It didn’t seem a large find to her, but it was enough to warrant more money, more people. Richard subleased their apartment back home. A small crew of six men arrived a few days later and set up camp. They altered the quonset hut, partitioning it off and sawing holes in the side so that everyone had their

own small space. Like a motel, Alice thought. The crew also brought generators, laptops and air conditioners. They brought lots of water.

The first morning, she stepped outside in her pajamas and found three of the crewmembers standing there drinking coffee. “I thought it would be more like Father Goose,” she said. “All bamboo huts on stilts.”

The men looked at her, returned to their coffee. “It’s a movie,” one of them, an Australian, said to the others. “Cary Grant.” The others nodded.

“Was that with Audrey Hepburn?” one of them said.

“No, a different woman,” said Audrey. “Very uptight.”

“No, I think it was Hepburn,” the man said.

Alice went with them to excavate the beach the first few days, but there weren’t enough tools for everyone to work at the same time. She ended up sitting around a lot, listening to monkey calls. When they found a mirror from a cosmetic compact, there was a party and they drank all the beer and ate all the meat around a big fire. Then they had to eat rice and fruit until more crew members came with more things. Wooden structures for the new crew members were put up in one afternoon, all of them surrounding the quonset hut.

It seemed too much to Alice, the movement and the noise. It was worse than the wall of green, rustling with rats and birds and monkeys. She even liked listening to it now and stayed near the hut while everyone was at Seven Site. She was wondering if one animal’s sound influenced another and, one day, she sat outside with the laptop at full volume, playing the calls of different animals: goat, dolphin, Tasmanian devil. When she

played a leopard roar, the monkeys went berserk. She played it a few more times to the same effect.

“I think I’d do the same thing.” It was the Australian. Some of the crewmen were filtering through and Alice looked around for Richard, but he wasn’t there.

“Sorry,” Alice said. “Am I bothering you?”

“No no,” he said. He pulled a small bag out of his pocket: Gummy Bears that he offered to her.

“Thanks,” Alice said. She took three. They were partially melted and oily.

“Ok. Keep on, keep on,” the Australian said. He bit the feet off a bear and walked back to his hut.

Alice played the recording again and this time recorded the response. She did the same thing with different stimuli: lions, eagles, her own voice.

“They all sound the same,” Richard said when she played them for him that night.

“But they’re not,” Alice said. She turned the screen so he could see the visualizations, all the spikes compressed together. She showed him the response to leopard next to the response for eagle: the spikes were different heights, they were spaced differently. “They’re different sounds,” she said.

“Huh,” Richard said. “Weird.” Then he showed her what they had found that day: charred bird bones, more charred clams. “They were opened the way they open oysters in New England,” he said.

“How’s that?” said Alice.

“By prying the shell open,” Richard said. He held his hands together, prayer like, and opened them the way children pantomime opening a book, palms up. Most cultures, he explained, just bash them with a rock.

The next day, Richard was eager to get to work and Alice was eager for him to go. Alice finished his coffee after she finished her own, then made another pot and sat in bed all morning and most of the afternoon, playing the monkeys’ responses over and over. First the response for leopard, then the response for eagle. Leopard. Eagle. Leopard. Eagle. It all sounded the same.

At around three o’clock it started to rain, something that happened nearly everyday at this time. Alice liked the sound of the rain on the hut, how it drowned out everything else at first and then became only background noise. She knew Richard and the crew would be huddled under a canvas awning, smoking and telling bad jokes. Sometimes Richard repeated them to her. He was very happy all the time now. He loved not only the purpose for the work, but the work itself, the digging in the dirt. “It’s a very primal thing,” he had explained.

There was a knock at the door and the Australian poked his head in to tell Audrey that it was raining and that she had left her shoes outside. He dangled the sandals by the straps, covered with sparkles and dirt. Lynn had bedazzled them one afternoon as a joke. “Such fabulous shoes,” he said. “It would be a shame.”

“Thanks,” she said, embarrassed at being caught in bed. She climbed out and took the shoes from him. They were soaked. “How did you get out of work today?” she asked.

“I’m just coming back,” the man said. He explained that they worked in shifts, that Richard oversaw all of it. Then he smiled, “And how did *you* get out of work today?”

“I am working,” she said.

After that Alice worked outside on the patio until it was too hot. She ordered books on monkeys that came in on the boats with new crew members. According to the literature, the only monkeys on the island were Diana monkeys, small creatures with black faces. Alice still had not seen them, only the movement they made in the trees.

“We saw one like that on the way to the beach,” Richard told her, looking over her shoulder. He had just returned from Seven Site and they had found something else, the rest of the compact case.

“No you didn’t,” Alice said. “No one has seen them. I’ve asked.”

“Well it was dead,” Richard added. He looked apologetic. “But enough of this monkey business.” She loved that he laughed at his own jokes and was in a pretty good mood as he hauled her off the bed. “Everyone thinks you’re the Monkey Lady, making monkey sounds all day long. Come on, there’s a party.”

“Whoopee,” Alice said, but she went to the party anyway. She drank beer and stood near the fire while Richard talked to everyone, all smiles. She liked watching him be happy.

The Australian walked up to her, screeching like a Diana. He was drunk, but it was a pretty good imitation. “What did I say?” he asked. He handed her another beer.

“I think it was the Gettysburg Address,” Alice said.

“You’re the Gettysburg Address,” he said. It was a terrible joke, but it made Alice very happy. “Ross Walton is reading cards,” he said, grabbing her by the wrist. “Come have your cards read.”

He dragged her to one of the newly built huts and they stood in line, waiting for Ross Walton. “So what are you doing with those monkey noises all day long?” the Australian asked.

“I’m trying to find out how they’re different,” Alice said. She explained: leopard, eagle, leopard, eagle.

“So one means ‘run up the tree’ and one means ‘run down the tree,’” he said. “Fight or flight.”

“Yes,” Alice said. “Though I think it’s more just flight. The problem is that they sound the same.”

“Everything sounds the same,” he said. Then it was his turn to have his cards read and he stepped inside the hut while Alice stood there, sipping beer. She talked to the man in line behind her. He was from Kiribati and told her about finding the compact case earlier that day. “It’s something my wife would do,” he was saying, “Bring makeup to an empty beach like that. She’s very optimistic.”

When the Australian came out, he looked very happy. He stood aside and held the door for Alice as she went in. Ross Walton was seated behind a dining table, wearing a costume turban that was a shiny purple color.

“Please sit down,” he said, shuffling the cards, and she did. She looked around the hut, which was partially constructed with plywood. The walls were painted a deep blue and photos of children were taped up.

Alice picked her cards and Ross looked at them. “This is your second marriage,” he said.

“I’m not married,” Alice said. “I’ve never been married.” It might have been a mistake to say this. It might reflect poorly on her or on Richard, but Ross shrugged.

“You can’t read these literally,” he said. “There isn’t a card for shacking up.”

He read more cards, talking about a small, sick child that Alice did not have and something about a dead father, which she did have. “Your child will not get better,” he said sadly, shaking his head. “But your father is at peace.” He smiled at her, folded his hands. This seemed to be the end.

“Great,” Alice said, and left.

“What did he tell you?” the Australian asked. He was drinking a fresh beer.

“You first,” Alice said. And the Australian told her how the cards had predicted that he and his wife would have a baby soon. “We have been trying for a while now,” he said. “It’s very good news.” Alice clinked beer cans with him. She told him about her marriage, her child, her dead father.

“I was married once before too,” the Australian said. “But we were very different people.”

“But we weren’t married,” Alice said. “Just engaged. Being engaged is terrifying.”

“Fight or flight?” he said.

“It’s the same thing,” Alice said. “Run up or run down.”

That was when Richard appeared. He was flushed and happy. “Hello there,” he said. He put one arm around Alice, the other around the Australian. “Come with me. I have a surprise.”

Richard explained that they had set a trap for monkeys and they had just caught one. “You wanted to see one, I thought,” he said and Alice said that she did. The Australian excused himself and returned to the fire while Alice and Richard held hands, walking away from the party and the huts.

They walked arm in arm along the strip of sand between forest and water. It didn’t take long to reach a place where everything was dark and they couldn’t hear the party over the jungle noises. Alice thought about what would happen when they left this place, if they ever did leave this place. This time was not like the other time: Richard would not be relieved and elated to get somewhere else, he would not propose to her. This is when the Dianas started screaming. They heard them scurrying up the trees and Alice stopped walking. There it was, the nuance, the slight inflection in the middle of the screech.

“What are they saying?” Richard whispered. She knew he was joking.

“It’s the call for leopard,” she said.

ISLAND FALLS

The Detroit airport is empty at three in the morning. It is all fluorescent lights and colorless floors and rows and rows of vacant chairs. Lara sits at a gate, wearing her sleep mask like a headband and watching a plane that is not hers push back. She has come too early, having carpooled with a colleague who is probably somewhere over Lake Michigan by now. Lara's own flight doesn't leave until seven. She realizes now that this was stupid. She hasn't slept, can't sleep, and the coffee kiosks will not be open for several more hours. There is nothing to do now but not think about Ben.

Instead she thinks about Kate and the yoga place in Maine. She and Kate were roommates a million years ago in college and even for a time after. They had both been fearless and inappropriate, stepping onto bar stages in the middle of music sets. Sometimes they got away with it, Kate always a bit more successful at this than Lara. She was prettier—gorgeous, really—and loud.

When Kate returned from a long weekend married to a stock broker, it seemed possible that everything might change: they moved to his huge house in California, she would have children, stay in one place. But the last Lara heard of her was a midnight call from the stock broker: Kate had flown to Paris to become a model, leaving behind her friends, her marriage. This was seven years ago. Kate's call last week had come out of the blue.

All she had to say was, "How are you?" and Lara told her everything: her life with Ben, their work in botany and his new interest in high-altitude lichen, the several trips they had made to the Andes together and his final decision to move there

indefinitely. He had asked her to join him out of courtesy. "It's the Andes," she had said, and left for the gym. When she came home, all of his things were in the middle of the living room. Ben was nowhere. The day after that, she came home and the pile was gone. She sat on the bed, trying to determine the exact moment he had stopped weighing her against mountains and lichen. She took exactly two Tylenol pm tablets. When she woke up, she took two more. When she finally got out of bed, she learned she had spent two days like this.

Kate listened to all of it. Then she said, "Let it wash over you." Lara had expected her to say, "Fuck him." She wanted Kate to be angry on her behalf, work up her famous rage. Lara tried to imagine everything washing over her like a wave rolling off her body and out to sea again, but then the wave became Ben, and then she cried and cried.

Kate waited until she was done, then told her how she had become a yoga instructor, how she had bought her great aunt's home in Maine and turned it into a retreat. "You should come for the week," she said. "I'll take care of the ticket. Just come."

So here is Lara, watching people slowly filter through the airport. She watches them appear regularly on the escalators, as if some machine below is rolling them out. They know exactly what to do, moving to the places they are supposed to be. They don't doubt it at all.

An electric cart holding three people makes its way down the center of the aisle. The beeping sound, the one asking people to move out of the way, must be broken because the driver is making the noise himself, his mouth open wide, smiling a little: *bee*

do, bee do, bee do. Lara looks at the faces of the people who alter their path. They don't find this funny at all.

At five o'clock, a kiosk opens and Lara buys a newspaper and returns to her seat. There is a man sitting across from her reading his own paper. He opens to a certain page and folds the paper back so that it is a small, manageable rectangle between his hands. He reads, not even looking up between articles, his concentration unbroken and Lara feels she is doing it all wrong.

Eventually, they are allowed to board the plane and this takes a long time and the flight itself takes a long time and then Lara is in Boston to repeat the whole process over again. When she lands in Bangor she is tired and suddenly frightened. Kate isn't answering her phone, so she leaves a message. She wants to call Ben, call someone, hear herself say that she is here. "Stop it," she tells herself as she collects her luggage. "Stop." And she does, leaning against a column with her eyes closed and not thinking about anything at all.

She opens her eyes when a hand touches her shoulder. It is Kate and Lara yelps and hugs her so hard they almost fall over. This is how they used to do it, though something is different now. Kate is unsettled. Her face is tight, but relaxes quickly, smiles. It is the face Lara remembers.

Kate is even smaller now. Lara can see the vein in her shoulder and she is surprised at how strong she is when she picks up a heavy suitcase, walking easily to the car.

She is called something else now and at first Lara thinks it is Amara. Doesn't this mean love in another language? "Amrita." Kate is careful to enunciate. "It means 'Life Nectar.' It's the name Bhaji Rani gave me. I studied with him in Nepal."

In the car Kate tells her about Nepal, about buying her aunt's house here in Maine and turning it into a yoga retreat, the way things run now. There are four or five women staying with them now. And a man whose name is Erik but everyone calls Sven. "Because he's Swedish," Kate laughs. Her smile is huge. "He's cute. He might work for you." Also, Kate's father, Oscar, is visiting. It's a last minute thing. She's been scrambling for places to put everyone.

"And you can do yoga or not," Kate says. "You can do Seva or not." Seva, she explains, is selfless service. It is also how the bathrooms get cleaned and the meals made.

"Ok," says Lara. And they are quiet for the rest of the drive except for when Kate has something to say about a field full of yellow flowers or a stand of birch trees and Lara agrees that Maine is a lovely place.

The house is in the middle of a tiny town. It is not on the coast, as Lara had thought, but inland, with several rivers and nearby waterfalls. There is a bar across the street and a grocery store, a post office, a giant building that used to be an opera house before it became a factory, then nothing. The buildings are the colors of birds: cream and grey and taupe, and the house, a three story Victorian place with a big porch and lots of rocking chairs, overlooks all of this. They pull into the driveway and Kate/Amrita and Lara begin to gather up the bags when a man interrupts them. "I've got it," he says and Lara knows him by his accent: Sven. He picks up the grocery bags, things Kate bought at

the Trader Joe's in Bangor, and follows Kate into the house, saying something that makes her laugh.

Lara carries her bag inside herself, remembering to be careful with the bottle of wine. It was a gift from Ben, something he brought back from Chile when his trips were still isolated and he still came back. Then he left and then Lara couldn't drink it, so she has brought it as a hostess gift for Kate.

Lara notices a collection of shoes at the door and takes her own off as well. She steps inside and is in the kitchen where Kate is sitting on the counter, talking to Sven. She is holding a sprig of parsley like a magic wand, waving it around while she speaks and Sven is grinning like mad. This is when Lara realizes that Sven is in love with Kate and that Kate doesn't know.

"Your room is called Pine, I think," Sven says, when he notices Lara just standing there. Kate smiles at her. "It is at the very top." So Lara carries her bag up to the third floor and finds her room is a wooden double bed and a single window with curtains that the breeze lifts easily. She can see more of the town from here, some shingled houses that remind her of the place she grew up. Most of them are dingy white or gray, though some are painted terrible colors like teal or bright yellow. It is the wrong place for colors like that.

Lara unpacks the wine and takes it downstairs with her. Sven is still at the kitchen counter, but he doesn't see her. He is listening to earphones and chopping something that smells green, his lips forming words that Lara can't quite make out. Everyone else must be doing yoga, she decides, unsure of whether she should interrupt or not. So she walks

barefoot around the yard, identifying the plants in a garden that takes up a quarter of the back yard. Lavender is just as she remembers: the right leaf structure, the right kind of flowers. The stalk is gnarled and woody. It must be an old plant, perhaps on its last summer. Lara rubs the leaves between her fingers, smells her hands.

“That’s lavender,” says a voice from the porch. It is a man with a little gray hair left, swinging slowly on the porch swing. Has he been there the whole time?

“I know,” she says. She stands and walks toward him. “My job is to study plants.”

He doesn’t seem to hear her. “I planted those—all of that,” he makes a sweeping motion with his arm.

“Lovely,” she says, climbing the steps. It feels strange to walk barefoot across wood.

“I’m Oscar,” he says as she sits down. “I’m Kate’s dad. Or Amrita’s dad. Or whoever she is.”

Lara tells him her name, that she knew Kate in college, and he nods.

“Were you a wild one, too?” he says and Lara smiles, says she guesses she was then. “I liked her better when she was a little wild,” he says.

And they talk about Kate when she was still Kate, the way her life was then. Lara is surprised at the things Oscar knows about: the weekend trips are perhaps understandable, but he knows about the men she dated, even for a few weeks. He knows the concerts she went to, the songs she sang while making those awful mayonnaise sandwiches on white bread. It’s a wonder she stayed so thin.

*

Lara is pleased by dinner. She likes that everyone eats together, sitting at a long wooden table. Normally she would hate the food, barley and carrots with something else that might be kale, but she appreciates that someone has prepared it, that they have tried to make it taste good by adding pine nuts.

In addition to Sven and Oscar and Kate, there are four other women who all look happy and tired. Two of them are from Canada and the dark-haired one keeps saying “eh” to make people laugh. The other two are there on their own, one with tattoos all over her arms, the other is from Illinois. Lara remembers her name is Anne.

There is a lot of small talk, where people are from, what they do, and Lara remembers the bottle of wine she’s been carrying around all evening.

“I don’t drink anymore,” Kate says, when she presents it to her. “We actually don’t allow alcohol in the house.”

“It’s on the website,” says the tattooed woman.

Lara puts it back in her suitcase.

She makes it to the morning yoga class and does a headstand against the wall. Most of the women can do this without a wall. They do their headstands in the middle of the room. They look like pillars or trees and the room looks like a forest.

These women could hold the pose forever. It is something Lara used to do at home every once in a while. Sometimes Ben would pass through the room while she was like this and he would tease her. Once he crouched on the floor in front of her and tried to feed her apple slices. “Swallowing upside down is weird, right?”

Afterward, there is breakfast: granola and fruit and healthy things. Then the guests perform their seva, cleaning the dishes and stripping beds. Lara feels a little funny about someone else making her bed. "Let me help you," she says to the Canadian woman, though what she means is: "Get out of my room."

Then everyone goes their separate ways. Lara notices Kate does not offer to entertain her, though she does lend her a CD and a portable player. "It's helped me," she says. So Lara goes outside and lies down in the grass, which is already warm. She closes her eyes and begins the tape, listening to the chime, to the calm voice. "Imagine a bright blue sky," the voice says. Lara imagines a bright blue sky. She opens her eyes and the sky is bright blue.

"This is ridiculous," she says, taking out the earphones and sitting up. She is surprised to see Oscar pulling into the driveway in a pick-up truck.

"I went to Denny's." He shrugs. "I like my bacon." He makes his way to the porch and Lara is suddenly afraid he will fall and this will be her fault. She walks the steps with him, sits down on the porch swing. They rock back and forth, both of them looking at the floor.

"You have ugly feet," Oscar says after a while. "Ballet?" Inside, Kate laughs in two short bursts. Neither Lara nor Oscar believe she's laughing at them, that she's listening to them at all.

"I used to take ballet," Oscar says. "It was for my tennis. I wanted to be more graceful. I used to give lessons at a club around here."

"I didn't know that," Lara says.

"It's hard, ballet," he says. "A different kind of control." Lara asks him if he finds yoga difficult in the same way and he smiles like she's told a joke that isn't funny. "It takes up her life," he says after a while. "I guess it has to."

"Do you drink, Oscar?" I ask.

“Not until five,” he says, and they wait until four-thirty, watching the women file inside for evening yoga. Lara grabs the glasses and Oscar opens the wine with a Swiss Army knife he keeps in his pocket. The wine is a deep red and when she holds the glass up to the light, Lara can’t see through it. The bottle says it has notes of earth and berries and she tries to taste the Chilean dirt where Ben must be now.

“Tastes like red currants,” Oscar says.

Lara sips again, tasting for currants, and he laughs. “Isn’t that what you’re supposed to say?”

“I think it tastes like ground slate,” she says.

“Hooves of a unicorn.”

They drink some more, listening to the sounds of Erik cooking on the other side of the screen. He is whisking something lightly, singing occasional phrases to himself: “Beautiful, bountiful, beautiful,” which Lara decides must be mantra music, something she has to be trained to appreciate.

She asks Oscar what else he has done aside from tennis and ballet and he says he was almost a psychologist years and years ago. He even has his MA, but he dropped out when he got married and had to earn real money.

“I like to think about people as being one way or the other,” he says. He explains these kinds to Lara, the difference between people who are afraid of being engulfed and people who are afraid of being abandoned. “It’s a little oversimplified,” he admits, “But it’s more or less true. What do you think you are?”

“I don’t know,” Lara says. “What about you?”

Oscar tells her he is definitely afraid of abandonment. He tells a story about coming home from school when he was six years old and finding his mother's attempted suicide. "I didn't remember it until I was in my twenties. I always thought I came home and couldn't find my mother and so I broke a window. I have this very vivid memory of broken glass."

By now the wine is gone. Oscar looks at the bottom of the glass and then at Lara. "That was good wine," he says. "I have something I want to show you." He rises from the swing with some difficulty and takes her arm as they walk down the porch steps, out to a shed behind the garden.

"Can you drive?" he says, pointing to a golf cart. "It's only a block away, but I can't walk that far." And he directs Lara out of the shed, through the back yard, and into the woods where they pick up a trail running parallel to a river.

"I used to come here all the time," he tells me. "I grew up in that house."

"It's a beautiful house," Lara says, remembering Kate's words about finding a place to put him.

"There's a woman around here who watches peoples' dogs when they're on vacation." Oscar is looking around now. It is dusk. "She has a gated yard and lets them run around and sometimes," he looks at Lara, watching for her reaction, "Sometimes she has baby deer there, too."

"The dogs don't eat the deer?" Lara takes a curve too fast, slows down.

"No." She can tell he is grinning, pleased with the story. "There used to be a big Rottweiler who took care of them. This woman rehabilitates the deer and they just jump

over the fence when they want to leave. Sometimes they come back, sometimes they don't."

They drive for a little while longer until it becomes dark and then they follow the sound of running water. "I thought this place was just a block away," Lara says.

"I haven't been here in years." Oscar holds up a hand so a branch doesn't scratch his face. "So what's the hardest thing that's ever happened to you?" He doesn't look at her, but stares straight ahead. It is a question no one has ever asked her before and Lara picks the story of Ben because it is the closest and because she can't not answer after he's told her everything about his mother. She only tells him that Ben left, not that he asked her to come with him, or that she said no.

"So abandonment," Oscar says, tapping the dashboard of the golf cart for emphasis as they hum along.

"Abandonment," she says.

And then they are there. Oscar is out and at the fence, feeling for the latch. "Come on," he says. "Come on. Have you ever seen a deer before?"

"Of course I have," Lara says. She wants to tell him about growing up in Minnesota with brothers and boyfriends disappearing into the woods every fall, stringing up the carcasses in the garage and paring them down to displayable trophies and edible parts. "Most of them are sick the first time they clean a deer," she would tell him. It is something Ben told her once, like a secret, and she realized they all must have been ashamed of this reaction: the appropriate response to warm intestines.

“But you’ve never seen one this close,” Oscar says. “Not alive.” He steps out of the cart and walks to the fence. There is a gate that he opens and walks inside.

“Roxeanne,” he whispers loudly, putting his hands on his knees as if he’s talking to a child. “Roxeanne.”

The deer has been there the whole time, but Lara can’t see it until it moves, stepping toward Oscar slowly. She has none of the timidity Lara expects of a deer. She is more like a dog, obeying slowly. Oscar puts his hand out and Roxeanne lets him touch her nose, her neck, just behind her ears. She doesn’t mind at all.

“Come here.” Oscar motions to Lara and she does, holding her hand out in front of her as if to push away spider webs. She touches her palm to the deer’s fur. It is warm, coarse and somewhat oily. She can feel where flies and ticks have made their marks. This is not the same as the dried skins stretched over wood and mounted on walls. The pieces move. They smell like dirt.

CONJOINED

And if we don't behave

They'll cut us down again

And we'll be hopping around on one foot

Looking through one eye.

"The Origin of Love" Hedwig and the Angry Inch

Gwen and Harold had been born attached at the back of the head. Everything else was normal, everyone had all their fingers and toes. At that time, the surgery to separate them was not very advanced, too much blood loss, and the doctor recommended leaving them as they were. Their mother Emily agreed. Their father was one of two men Emily met on a singles cruise. Neither of them knew about the twins or got a vote about the surgery.

So Emily had a car seat made for them with an adjustable back and they sat on the bench seat, Gwen facing one window, Harold facing the other. They grew up like that, back-to-back. They sat back to back in the middle of the sofa, a set of feet on each armrest, which had to be reupholstered twice. If one of them moved the wrong way, it stretched the skin that connected them and they would both experience some pain. They learned to hold their heads very straight and very still. They wore a lot of button-up shirts. When they walked, Harold walked forward and Gwen walked backward. Sometimes she chatted with whoever was behind her. She got very good at explaining their condition, learning later that this candidness was disarming to people who might

otherwise gawk or be unkind. Gwen became the charming one and Harold was the one who knew where they were going.

Some advances were made in the separation surgery shortly before the twins turned eight and, when Emily brought it up, they both cried.

“Why?” said Gwen.

“It would be so weird,” said Harold.

Emily worried that she was letting them grow up too strangely, that maybe they would be happier if Gwen could have sleepovers with other girls and Harold could play sports or whatever it was that boys did. “What happens when you start dating?” she asked. “What even happens when you use the bathroom?” Of course Emily had known how they negotiated the bathroom when they were smaller, but things had to be different now.

“We have a system,” Gwen said. “We have different boundaries than other people. It’s not a bad thing.”

When they turned thirteen, Emily pushed the issue a little harder. “You’re going to have urges,” is the way she phrased it. This is when the twins explained that they had had urges for a while now.

“We’re just very aware that somebody always knows,” Harold said. “It’s a little like being Catholic, I think.”

“I think it’s made us very aware,” Gwen said. They made a show of nodding, Harold’s face tilting up while Gwen’s tilted down, then they switched. Like a seesaw.

“You’re thirteen,” Emily said. “You’re not supposed to be aware.” But they went on nodding, grinning now.

The issue of the surgery came up again when they turned eighteen and got accepted to different colleges. Emily made vegetarian lasagna with garlic bread and, during dinner, pointed out that Harold could not go to the Art School of Chicago while Gwen went to the University of Washington unless some changes were made.

“Who needs college?” Harold said. “We could become circus freaks .Or start a band. Gwendolyn has been wanting to learn guitar.”

“I think we should consider the surgery,” Gwen said. She felt Harold stiffen when she said it. Gwen took the lower half of Emily’s garlic bread from her plate and ripped off the crust.

Harold took a breath. “We could be famous,” he said. “We’d be huge in Japan.”

Gwen could feel his rib cage move. Sometimes she could feel his heart, but not now. Gwen cut her lasagna into pieces without eating it. Her fork made polite *tinks* against her plate.

“I have to brush my teeth,” Harold said. It was a thing he did when he was nervous. They both had good teeth.

Gwen and Harold stood up and walked down the hall toward the bathroom. Gwen, walking backwards, shrugged her shoulders at Emily who gave her a little nod. Then she looked back at the table. Gwen thought she saw her mother touch the back of her own head and wince.

They closed the bathroom door and Gwen listened to Harold brushing his teeth. She bent backward so he could spit into the sink. An ornate gold hand mirror was hanging from a nail. Gwen had bought it at a garage sale for three dollars, though Harold had protested that it was tacky. She took it and held it up so that she could see Harold's face in the wall mirror.

"Hi," he said, looking at her.

"Hi yourself," she said. "How are you?"

Harold shook his head slightly and Gwen's head moved, too. She stiffened her neck and they each held still. "But I like you," said Harold. They turned sideways and used the mirror to look at their profile. Their hair was the same color blonde and Gwen kept hers longer in the front—just below her jaw—but shorter in the back, the same length as Harold's. It looked like they shared one giant head.

Gwen hooked her elbows with his and they pulled their backs together. It was the way that they hugged.

"I like you, too," Gwen said. "But aren't you tired of being a freak?"

"We're not," said Harold. "I don't think we're freaks."

*

They had the surgery anyway. There was no good reason not to. Even Harold finally admitted that.

When they were laid back-to-back on the operating table, the anesthesiologist put them to sleep one at a time. Gwen listened to Harold's breathing change. She felt his back slump against hers and she started to cry.

“Nothing to worry about,” the doctor said, holding the breathing apparatus over her mouth. “Good. Breathe. Good.”

They woke up in separate beds, facing each other. “Harold, that’s your face,” Gwen said. She wondered how she could be seeing his face and then she remembered and touched the bandage at the back of her head. She would start most mornings like this, at least for a while, reminding herself of what had happened.

“My head hurts,” said Harold. He shut his eyes.

Gwen’s head hurt too, but she was able to get up and use the bathroom. Walking felt strange now. She had to lean against walls and door frames.

When she came back, she sat on the edge of Harold’s bed. The stand between their beds held cards and balloons. One of the cards was from Gwen’s friends. They had written something about being able to have a real girls’ night. The word “real” was underlined. Harold had once asked her what happened at girls’ nights. Pillow fights? Lesbian make outs? “Hell if I know,” she had said.

Gwen picked up a heart-shaped box full of chocolate. A Get Well card was taped over the shiny “I love you” on the lid.

“Do you want some chocolate?” she asked.

“No,” said Harold.

She lay down next to him and they looked at each other’s face for a long time. “You have a mole,” said Harold. He touched a spot under her chin. He had never been able to see this part of her face before. They didn’t know what to say then and turned onto their sides, easing their backs together.

*

After the surgery, Gwen and Harold were in physical therapy for a long time. They would do neck exercises and relearn how to walk. Gwen would be in physical therapy longer than Harold, strengthening her quadriceps and learning how to move forward. “Like a normal person,” Harold teased.

At home, Gwen practiced walking and Harold walked backwards in front of her. “You’re going so slow,” he said. “Can’t you speed up?”

“Sure,” Gwen told him. “But I don’t like things coming at me so quickly.”

*

Harold started school first. Gwen and Emily drove him to Chicago and moved him into his dorm. His hair was filling in over the place where they had been stuck together. The skull was a little flatter than it should have been, but the doctor said that Harold had a good chin, that it balanced out his profile.

Before they left Harold in his new place, they went out for pizza. This is Harold in Chicago, Gwen thought as they walked around the city, looking into bars and shops. She tried to fix him to this backdrop of tall buildings next to the river. She walked backwards in front of him. Walking backwards was more difficult now. “Are you going to wear ties?” she asked. Harold hadn’t worn many ties before; it took too much time to thread between their necks.

“Maybe,” said Harold. He put his hands on Gwen’s shoulders to steer her around a group of people while he thought about this. He seemed pleased with the idea.

“I’m going to grow my hair long,” Gwen said.

That evening Gwen and Emily drove home from Chicago. “Goodbye,” Harold said to Emily, hugging her. “Goodbye,” he said to Gwen. He held onto her a little longer. It was strange to feel his arms around her like that with their chests together. They had always hooked elbows before. Hugging felt insincere.

On the way home, Emily tried to talk to her. They had never been together without Harold. “So what is it like, losing a hundred and sixty pounds?” Emily said.

“It’s weird,” Gwen said. “My head hurts all the time.”

“Like a headache?” Emily asked.

“No,” Gwen said. She touched the back of her head. “Like Harold is moving the wrong way.”

“But he isn’t there,” Emily said. She glanced at Gwen, sitting up straight in the passenger seat, wincing at the reflective posts as they passed them.

“This is what being lonely is, isn’t it?” Gwen said.

“That’s rude,” said Emily. “I’m right here.”

“You know what I mean,” Gwen said and Emily said she wasn’t sure that she did.

“I think you have been a very lonely person,” Gwen said. “We didn’t know.”

*

A week later Gwen moved into her own dorm in Seattle. Her roommate Ani talked about her boyfriend and while Gwen didn’t really care about the boyfriend, she had never been talked to about things like that before. When Ani learned Gwen’s story, she dragged her out to a club and Gwen danced with everybody. Another night, Ani had a small viewing party of a film about conjoined twins. The film had Cher in it and a bunch

of people crowded into their dorm room and sat on their beds. Afterwards, Gwen answered their questions and showed them her scar.

“What was it like to be separated?” one girl asked.

“It’s awful,” Gwen said.

“Why did you do it then?” someone else asked.

Gwen shrugged. “I don’t know.” After that, the girls told her what it was like not to be attached to someone, what it was like to kiss boys at thirteen, what it was like to do other things. They took her to a party where she kissed a boy with a metal stud in his tongue. She became mildly famous on campus.

“You wouldn’t believe what these people do,” she told Harold when he phoned.

“Yes,” Harold said. “Here, too.” So he was experiencing the world as well.

Gwen wondered if he’d experienced more than she had.

“It’s terrifying,” she said. “My head hurts like crazy.”

“It’s ok,” said Harold. “You’re ok.”

“Doesn’t your head hurt?” Gwen asked.

“Not really,” he said. “Not anymore.”

She took up running. She and Harold had never been able to run. They had been chased by a dog once and the two of them scrambled sideways before Harold hooked their elbows together and lifted her up, her feet kicking in the air. Now Gwen made long loops up and down the hills of Seattle. She got lost and ran her way out, began to know the place. She learned where the locals drank their coffee and that the rain came down not in the heavy drops she was used to but instead in a fine, pervasive mist. She

memorized bus routes and the schedule of the Monorail, learned the history of the '62 World's Fair. She failed to appreciate the architecture of the Space Needle or the Science Center, which her friends found a sign of good taste.

A boy named Sebastian took her there on a date once. They rode the elevator quietly and he took pictures of her peering out over the city, her hair—just past her ears now—flying all over the place.

“My dad proposed to my mom in the rotating restaurant here,” he said. “It’s really expensive.” Gwen pictured a couple moving around in a slow circle, taking in the whole city from a single point.

“It’s kind of a strange structure,” Gwen said. She thought about this on the elevator ride down, willfully attaching to someone, and was sick into a plastic bag containing a mug she had bought in the gift shop.

“I’m not going to propose to you,” Sebastian said. It was just occurring to him to pull back her hair. He pushed some of it out of her face.

“I know,” she said.

“Can I see it?” Sebastian asked. “The scar?”

“Why didn’t you?” Harold asked over the phone that night.

“It seemed obscene,” Gwen said.

“Why did you throw up?”

“I got vertigo.”

Harold said that she had never had vertigo before and Gwen told him to be quiet.

“You don’t have anything like it there. You can’t understand.”

“We had a World’s Fair,” he said, and talked about the Ferris Wheel. He had ridden the one on Navy Pier with friends who had grown up in Chicago. They had eaten funnel cakes and slipped a flask onto the ride. “I’ll take you when you come,” he said.

When she did visit, Harold took her on the architecture boat tour up and down the Chicago River. It was fall and the leaves were almost done changing. When the docent mentioned the Montauk Building was the first skyscraper, Harold leaned in and whispered, “I kissed a girl there.” Gwen punched him in the arm and tried to grin.

Afterwards, they met some of his friends for sushi. The friends were loud and Gwen was surprised that some of them were girls. None of her friends were boys. Harold’s friends were pretty girls who laughed a lot. One of them—was her name Sara?—asked Gwen a lot of questions. Sara was probably the one who had kissed Harold by the Montauk Building. But maybe not. Maybe it was all of them.

They didn’t ride the Ferris Wheel. “Next time,” said Harold when he dropped her off at the airport. He pulled her bags out of the trunk while they made arrangements for Harold to visit her in Seattle, to see just how awful the Space Needle really was.

“Ok,” Gwen said. “Give me a hug.” She turned around and waited to feel Harold’s back against hers, to hook their elbows together, but he spun her around again. They faced each other. “We can hug like this now,” he said, arms around each other.

“Like normal people,” Gwen said, her face in his neck.

“Yeah,” Harold said. “Don’t cry. Being normal isn’t so bad.”

“It hurts,” Gwen said. “It really hurts. Let’s just stand like we used to for a minute ok? Just for a minute.”

She felt Harold's arms tighten around her. "I don't think that's a good idea," he said.

Standing in line for the security checkpoint, Gwen took three extra aspirin.

*

On the plane, there were lots of babies. "It's going to be a shriek-fest," said the man in the seat next to hers. He had an eye patch and wore the camouflage clothing that soldiers wear. Gwen guessed he was coming home from the Army.

"Great," Gwen said. "A shriek-fest." The aspirin was kicking in, everything happening through a nice fog. She buckled her seat belt and rubbed antibiotic lotion into her palms. Planes always felt dirty to her. She folded her hands in her lap and looked at all the well-behaved heads nestled into their seat backs. No one wore hats anymore.

Neither Gwen nor the man next to her spoke again until they had taken off, clouds flicking by the windows, and a flight attendant came by with juice and soda. The man asked for cranberry juice and when he reached for the cup, Gwen saw that he had only one arm. She noticed part of his leg was missing too, cut off just below the knee.

"Fucking land mine," he said to her. Was he smiling? He must have been in his thirties, and Gwen liked that he didn't filter himself for her.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Eh," the man shrugged. "They gave me a medal and money for it. I'll be alright." The man explained that the wounds used to hurt. The hand that wasn't there would itch or the missing calf muscle would cramp up. "They call it phantom limb pain," he said. He told her about all the medication they had put him on to fix the phantom limb pain and

how none of this had worked until he met Dr. Ramachandran who had set up a mirror. “He held it right down my center,” the soldier said. He held his hand up to his nose, like one of the Stooges warding off a poke in the eyes. “So in the reflection my good hand looks like my missing hand, my good leg looks like my missing leg. And I can move them around. I can stretch or scratch or whatever I need.”

“And that works?” Gwen asked.

The soldier shrugged. “It helps.”

Gwen waited until the seatbelt sign was off, then went to the bathroom. She bent backwards over the sink so that the back of her head touched the mirror. Then she opened her make-up compact up to see what this looked like: two Gwens back-to-back. She watched herself turn her head this way and that way, up and down. Then she straightened out, her jaw level, the Gwen in the mirror was level. She stayed like that for a while, holding very still, feeling the coolness of the mirror against the back of her head.

Finally, when another passenger tapped on the door, Gwen went back to her seat. “Hello, Baby,” the soldier said when she sat down, a thing that shocked her until she saw that he was directing his words to the floor in front of him. Pretty soon, she saw a baby appear from beneath the seat, pulling itself forward with its tiny fingers. It had somehow made its way around the metal apparatus of the chair and Gwen worried he—it looked like a he—might hit his head. She wanted to cheer when he crawled out from under the seat and began to stand up, holding onto the soldier’s good leg for support.

“Oh,” said the woman in front of them. “Aidan.” She didn’t seem worried. Aidan probably went missing all the time. “Sorry,” she said to the soldier who said

everything was fine, fine. He leaned down and scooped up Aidan, standing up and handing him back to his mother like it was no trouble at all.

PIRATES

Sandra is on the satellite phone with either her husband or her kid, walking up and down the left deck in her underwear. We know it is the port deck. We know that. But we always refused to use the sailing lingo Dad taught us. We might as well keep it up.

This is our parents' sailboat, the forty foot *Marie Elaine*, named for Mom. (I am Elaine, also named for my mother. Sandra used to joke that it was a wonder their dogs didn't come in pairs of Maries and Elaines.) Our parents were killed in a car accident a month ago and now we are expected to go on with our lives, to be responsible, to settle their estate.

It was bad enough going through the house, dividing up their things into what to keep or sell or give away, but neither Sandra nor I can afford to keep the boat. And we like sailing. We're even good at it, able to crew this three person boat with just the two of us. Our family vacations were never about the place itself—the Caymans, Nova Scotia, once Punta Cana—but in making it there. Usually the worst thing to happen, aside from one or two real storms, were the fights: always me and Dad against Mom and Sandra. Usually Sandra threatened to throw herself overboard, and sometimes did. Then Dad would make a quick circle, pick her up, and keep moving. We are only selling the boat because we have to.

Mr. Mehter, the man who bought the *Marie Elaine*, is making a gift of her to his wife. He made a ridiculously low offer—fifteen thousand less than we asked—but we took it. “Best to cut our losses,” Sandra said. I said she sounded like Tim, her accountant husband, but I also agreed. In the end, Mehter decided to surprise his wife and threw in

travel expenses and an extra thousand to have the boat ferried from Maine to Jamaica where they are on what he calls their second honeymoon. Sandra suspects he's making up for something awful. "No one's that uxorious," she says. Sandra teaches Latin to high schoolers. At any rate, it's extra money and Sandra and I both thought why not. It is an escape from the details of funerals and estates, from people trying to console us with *at least*: at least they died instantly, at least they died together.

Still on the phone, Sandra is making some gesture to me. Pen and paper? I point to the ship's wheel, a real wooden spoke deal. There is actual steering to be done. To make my point, I move the wheel slightly to the right. Sandra gives me the finger, goes below deck. She re-emerges to say that, thanks to me, she's lost the signal. "Like you have anything to steer around." She makes a sweeping gesture with her hand: there is nothing around us but blue.

The blue is part of the problem. It's the third day of a four day trip. I proposed that we ignore our father's rule of hugging the shoreline, instead taking the straight line through the Atlantic between Maine and Jamaica. Sandra argued against this at first, but relented when she realized how much time it would save. We both have jobs to get back to.

So we haven't seen land for three days. And now we are bored with each other, with the monotony of kale and barley, which is all the food we packed, thinking we might force ourselves to become healthy. We are aggravated by the sound system that broke after the first glorious drunken night, the loss of all three thousand plus MP3s we had downloaded. We miss our families. We miss our parents. This is why I start snipping at

Sandra about walking around in her underwear. At least I have the decency to wear a swimsuit. “You’d understand if you had a child,” she says.

“I would understand indecency if I had a child?”

Sandra folds her arms as if she’s won, her gray eyes narrow. “Yes.”

And this starts a whole new argument: Sandra is a sellout with a picket fence, I am a slacker without any discernable direction. Neither of us actually believes there’s anything wrong with sellouts or slackers, they are just convenient names because they are true. Her Tim is dull and predictable and she is in the middle of eviscerating my George, my lack of consistency in men, how I don’t know what I want, when we see the skiffs.

They look like any pair of motorboats, one white and one yellow, bouncing over the water. They are almost gleeful, racing each other. It is a game they play, Yusuf will tell us later. Whoever wins does not have to deal with the hostages.

Even when they steer straight for us, we still don’t think *pirates*. We think of people about to see us without enough clothes. “Pants,” I say. And we both rush into the cabin, yanking the drawers open and pulling out shirts and bras and everything but pants.

It isn’t until we hear the thuds overhead that we realize something is wrong. Sandra stops to listen. “Are we being boarded?” she says. We hold very still, listening to the movement, to the metal of their guns—maybe M-16s, though I don’t know anything about guns—clank against our railing as they climb over.

“I told you we should have hugged the shoreline,” Sandra says putting on one shirt over another. She always anticipates the worst and suggests we wear layers in case this is all we have to wear for days. And so we receive the pirates in shorts bunched

under jeans, windbreakers thrown over sweatshirts thrown over T-shirts. Even this far from shore it is broiling and we are immediately too warm.

“Hello,” a man’s voice calls down to us. The voice is friendly, even pensive, like a neighbor who has found the door ajar and let himself in. “Hello?”

We walk up to the deck slowly. Sandra holds her hands up, though none of the guns are actually pointed at us. There are five men on our boat and they look like the kids we used to cross the streets to avoid: cargo shorts and tattered shirts, some of them have scarves or bandanas around their heads and they wear their guns on straps over their shoulders. One of them plays with the handle, the barrel shifting rhythmically like a toy.

“Hello,” says the man at the front of the group again. He is wearing a purple shirt that says *Property of Old Navy Athletic Dept.* across the chest. “Please do not be alarmed. We will be taking your boat. This goes smooth if you cooperate.”

I look at Sandra, who looks like the Michelin man in all those clothes. She drops her arms.

The pirates encourage us to make ourselves comfortable on the cushioned seats at the aft while they make piles of our things: my hypoallergenic pillow, the green glass barware set Mom found too ugly to keep in the house, the coffee and bottles of wine. I watch them move between boats, carrying our things. It is easy for them, even fun, and every once in a while they jostle each other and grin big.

“You are too warm,” says Old Navy when he brings us mugs of water. He points at Sandra’s windbreaker, but doesn’t touch. “You will keep your things.” He gestures to

the growing pile of our stuff. He explains that they don't want our things; they only want the boat. It is just business.

So we strip down to our shorts and T-shirts. I whisper something to Sandra about parading around in her underwear and she tries to laugh, drapes a sweatshirt over my head.

After this, we are transferred to the yellow motorboat and wait while our things are loaded onto the white one. "Where are we going?" Sandra asks one of the men in our boat. His name is Yusuf. He is leaning against the side wall, tapping away at a game or a message on his phone.

"To Essien," he says.

"Where's that?" I ask.

This makes him smile. It is a nice smile, like a boy I used to date. "Essien is a he," Yusuf says. And then he starts singing the Air Force song, the one about the wild blue yonder. He belts this out as he cranks the engine, and when the chorus is over he just *dum de dums*. And as we speed off to Essien, I watch the instruments, trying to figure out where we are, but it becomes apparent that the compass is broken. We could be anywhere.

The water is smooth, though we are going fast enough that even the little waves make us bounce hard. I look at Sandra who is holding her sweatshirt in her lap, her face already fixed and expressionless.

*

It is hard to say how long it takes to get to the main boat. Both Sandra and I fall asleep at some point, though it must be at least several hours because the sun is starting to set when we slow down. The boat that we sidle up to is about the same size as the *Marie Elaine*, though this is a speed boat with a bridge stacked on top of the cabin. It probably used to take tourists on fishing trips. There is another small boat, similar to the one we are in, tied to it. This little boat has an awning made from a tarp, sheltering a pile of random things: a toaster oven, cases of bottled water still in the plastic wrapping, a Louis Vuitton luggage bag that may or may not be faux. When we dock and tie all the boats together, it is a little floating village and the men step easily from one boat to another.

Sandra and I stay in our seats while the men scurry around, securing the boats, adding our things to the pile of other things. We wait like this until a man in a dark suit appears at the edge of the main boat and looks down at us. "Come," he says. "Please." He holds out his hand and helps Sandra and me onboard one at a time. "Mind your step." His accent is thicker than the others, and he is older than they are. He seems tired, the way older dogs do when surrounded by puppies. This is Essien, the pirates' mediator. He arranges the exchange of boats and money through a complicated network of insurance companies, anonymous bank accounts and untraceable e-mail addresses. We will only be here a few days, ransomed, returned unharmed. "So long as all the players play," he explains all this as he shows us to our room. And we interpret this to mean that we play the role of captives, that our families play the roles of ransomers, the pirates will play the role of pirates.

Our room is a tiny compartment with a corner bed that is shaped like a slice of pie. “You will be comfortable here?” Essien says and we aren’t sure if this is a statement or a question. We nod and Essien shows us the rest of the boat, though there isn’t much else to see: head, galley, another bedroom.

When we come up to the deck again, there is a lot of noise on the other boat, the one with all the stuff on it. It sounds like a woman screaming, but it is hard to tell. The face is very bloody. The legs are bloody too. We watch as one of the pirates picks her up from the floor of the boat and drops her lightly overboard. Everybody laughs.

“She has been here too long,” Essien says. “No one paid for her. Now we eat.” And Sandra and I are quick to sit down.

“Keep it light,” she says as we sit down. I am good at keeping it light, at making small talk. Sometimes it is the only kind of conversation I can make.

Dinner is the last of our kale, which the pirates don’t like either. “Like super lettuce,” one of them says. We have learned that he is also Yusuf, younger than the first one. This younger Yusuf holds up a leaf and pretends to be unable to rip it apart. The others find this very funny. Their teeth are all white and straight.

The water all around the boat is still blue and the only sound is the little waves that touch against the boat. That woman must have dropped right to the bottom.

The pirates drink a dark liquid from a bottle that they pass around. “I want it to be rum,” I say to Sandra. “Isn’t that what pirates drink? Rum?” Sandra shrugs. It may be Scotch, she says. Or iced tea. “No, it’s rum,” the younger Yusuf tells us. He even sings

the line: *Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum*. “That’s how it goes, isn’t it?” He offers us a swig, but we shake our heads no.

When the food is gone, there isn’t much to clean up: just greasy hands and aluminum foil. There is a Tupperware bowl full of rice that goes back into the refrigerator and then the Yusufs and some others hop onto one of the smaller boats—all the small boats have their awnings up now—and prepare for bed. All of the pirates sleep on these smaller boats except for Essien, whose room is across the galley from our own.

Neither Sandra nor I brush our teeth. We lay down in our clothes, our heads at the small end of the pie wedged bed and I recall one of our father’s old jokes: if we were ever kidnapped, the kidnappers would pay to give us back. This is the wrong thing to say. Sandra drapes an arm over me. “Shut up, ok Elaine?” I keep waiting for her to cry, to cry myself, but we don’t.

I keep waiting for the door to open, to be raped and thrown overboard too. But the only thing we hear are the footsteps of people walking the deck above us, the water on the other side of the hull.

When I wake up, Sandra isn’t in bed with me. I find her at the bow of the boat, rolling her eyes at Essien. “He’s banned workouts,” she tells me.

“Not everything,” says Essien. “Just not jumping up and down. Not in the morning. It is very loud.” He gestures to the skiffs where most of the crew is still sleeping. They lay on mats spread on the boats’ floors, their arms thrown over their eyes.

“I’ll do yoga, then,” Sandra says and Essien is satisfied with this. He passes sideways between me and the cabin and I follow him to the aft.

“Is there coffee?” I ask.

“No coffee,” he says. In fact, they usually don’t have breakfast. And I say that we have coffee if someone will just dig it out of our things, please. At this, Essien turns and goes below deck and I sit down and wait for someone else to wake up. I watch Sandra go through her sun salutations, then I lay down on the seat and try to sleep, surprised when I wake up and find that I have. Old Navy is climbing over the railing.

“Good morning,” I say and he nods, sleepy. I repeat my request for coffee and he holds up a finger, jumps onto the skiff, and returns with a little brown bag of coffee beans.

“I need the grinder, too,” I say.

“The grinder?” he says.

“Yes. It’s a little machine. This big. The top comes off like this,” I pantomime the separation of one thing from another. “And you use it to chop up the beans.” Old Navy nods and hops over again.

“I also need the French press,” I call after him. “And a kettle or something.” And eventually all this is dragged up. Essien only protests a little when I grind the beans in the galley—it is right outside his room—and soon there is coffee and Essien, the younger Yusuf, and I sit at the aft and drink it. Yusuf acts like this is the first time he’s had coffee, though I think this is a joke. He taps out a beat with his foot, refills his cup. Essien pulls out a pack of cigarettes and offers them around. It is quiet, drifting there like that.

*

For the most part, we don't know what the pirates do all day. They don't seem to talk much, but their movements are hive-like, all of them convening in the same instant for meals or for sleep. Sometimes I look up and they are all suddenly on one of the skiffs, already speeding away. They also love their smart phones: there is no reception out here, but they play games like Tetris and another game where they shoot birds. I like to watch them hunched over, the delicate, intent movements of their fingers.

It is too hot below deck, so Sandra and I stay in the open air and try to keep out of the sun. We have been allowed our 30 SPF lotion and our beach towels and we spend most of the day moving our towels around as the shadows shift. I am amazed by how much we sleep. The first day passes quietly and quickly until the younger Yusuf taps me awake with his foot.

“We need to call your people for the money,” he says.

Sandra can rattle Tim's number off from memory. I have to find George's on my phone. “This husband is new?” the young Yusuf asks.

“He's not my husband,” I say.

“Will he still pay for you?” he asks. When I shrug, he asks if there is someone else they can call.

“Our parents are dead,” Sandra says. “They just died.” And Yusuf nods the way my father did at the Midas shop when they would tell him that there was another thing was wrong with the car.

I give him the number to our parents' lawyer.

And then it is time for dinner, which is rice with flecks of meat in it, a little bit of wine. The pirates sit in their circle again, but no one speaks and pretty soon they break into smaller groups, speaking their own language to each other.

“I feel so dull,” Sandra says. She rolls the rice into a ball with her fingers. “I can’t make conversation.” And I try to say something. I end up babbling about jet lag: how this is like jet lag. How it hits you harder the second day. “Have you ever been on a jet?” I ask Old Navy. We both know it’s a stupid question, I might start asking about their favorite colors next, but he shakes his head. “Only boats,” he says. He tells us a story about a boat his uncle had when he was a kid. We can’t make out the details of his story, but we gather he liked it.

Sandra and I go to bed before it is dark and, despite the amount of napping we’ve done, we sleep all night.

*

The third day, we wake to the sound of the grinder in the galley and Essien yelling. “This machine is the *deek deek*,” he says when I open the door. There are coffee grounds everywhere.

“You have to keep the lid on,” I say.

“You do this.” He points to the coffee tray and goes back into his room. I do, and when Sandra and I take the coffee and head up to the deck, he joins us. “We do this every day,” he says and Sandra says that that would be nice. “It is routine,” he says. “When there is routine, there are fewer suicides.” Sandra doesn’t have much to say to that.

When the younger Yusuf joins us, he has some coffee and hums a Prince song, the one about starfish. Essien says something to him in another language and Yusuf goes below deck, returning with a camera and a sheet. "It is proof of life," he explains to us as they string up the sheet for a backdrop. "It is best if you do not look too good." So Sandra and I mess up each other's hair and arrange our shirts to look more disheveled than they already are. Yusuf offers his comb and laughs when Sandra teases my hair so that it stands up. "Like Faith Hill," Yusuf says, clapping once and pretending to laugh hard. Then we stand side by side in front of the sheet and Essien directs us. "Head down more, you." And, "Don't smile."

He shows us the photo in the view window: we look thin enough, though more than starved or neglected, we look like we are just out of bed.

*

Essien is adamant about our having routines, so I pick fishing because I can't think of anything else. I have never liked the fish part of it, touching the bodies coated in mucus. Though staring into the water appeals to me. It sounds meditative without having to actually meditate. Essien has set me up with a hook and rod, though I don't catch much of anything. Mostly I sit in my yellow swimsuit, my legs dangling off the edge, and throw a piece of string into the water over and over again. "You should use bait." Old Navy stands over me.

"Right. I'll just dig up some worms," I say. This is when he bends down, draws taut the string of my swimsuit, a decorative tie at my hip, and clips off a two inch length of string with a knife that I don't even see.

“Use this,” he says, hands it to me. “The fish like the bright colors.”

I don’t know what to say. I say “Thanks.”

*

At night, Sandra and I talk about home. She misses Tim. She hates the image she has of him: eating frozen dinners after feeding the baby from a jar. Or, worse, eating dinner with friends who are trying to cheer him up. She has some reservations about a woman from the Christmas party. “I miss him most at night,” she says without embarrassment. We have never talked to each other like this, like girlfriends. She wants to be spooned so I press my stomach to her back. “Jesus, Elaine,” she says, but when I groan and roll away, she holds my hand to her neck and pulls me close again.

“Make up your mind, then,” I say. And she keeps holding my hand. She talks about missing the baby. She has dreams about them, she says.

I don’t think I dream about anything now. It is all gray sleep. Of course I miss George, but I don’t want to sound like she does. Has she always been so self-indulgent, talking about herself like this? I won’t talk about George, I decide. I just won’t.

*

Most of the pirates are fishermen when they are not here, doing pirate things. I learn this from the second Yusuf. Essien has mandated that someone have coffee with us in the mornings and the second Yusuf is usually up the earliest. He has tried to foster my fishing, bringing me a bucket to store any catches and telling me what kind of fish it is. Mostly flounder. If I knew anything about fish, I might be able to approximate where we are.

Instead, I become familiar with what to do with flounder. I know how to hold it down with a palm and make one clean slice from head to tail, where to hook my fingers and pull it apart so that there is head and spine in one hand, body in the other. There are silver scales on all of my clothes.

I like cooking the fish, too. When I cook in the galley, Essien complains about the smell. So I usually grill over a small camping grill kept on the smaller boat. When the crew makes trips to the mainland, something they do a few times a week, I ask them to bring back some vegetables and limes so I can make ceviche. And that goes over well.

Essien always stays behind when they make these trips. Someone has to keep an eye on us, he says. Though with Sandra meditating all the time and my constant fishing, this seems like a joke. Sometimes he feels like talking and we learn that he was a lawyer in his country where he has two wives and four children. Or four wives and two children. Or two children by each of his four wives. It is hard to tell because he mumbles, slips in and out of English. He has a brother in a part of Florida that we have never been to, but we hear is very nice.

The talks are always awkward and we are relieved when the crew returns. We are always pleased to see fresh food, also anxious to see if they have brought back newspapers. Or newspaper clippings. They don't want us figuring out where we are by the names or local headlines. Initially, it is all favorable, front page stuff: "Sisters Kidnapped by Atlantic Pirates," "Sisters Alive," things like this. A lot of them use the proof of life photo, though we are much thinner now. And sunburned.

Sandra loves the articles. Especially the interviews with our bereaved family members, Tim making pleas. There is even a quote from George saying he misses me so much. And I miss him, too, though I cannot picture his face.

Essien is pleased by the headlines. “These are good,” he says. “This will help.”

“Help what?” Sandra asks.

And Essien explains the problem: no one actually has the million dollars they’re asking for. Tim does not. George had a bout of nervous laughter when they asked him. The lawyer told them to talk to the government. The government told them to talk to the families, who referred them back to the government. “We will lower the price tomorrow and see what then,” he says.

“What about Mehter?” I offer. “It’s his boat.”

“Him?” Essien laughs. “Not another penny, that guy says.”

So we keep up our routines. Sandra is getting pretty good; she can sit on a life vest and meditate for hours. This is when the pirates look at her the longest, sitting up straight and thin, her face calm and somewhere else. And I am amazed she doesn’t seem to know, doesn’t suck in her stomach or tighten her arms. “I can think about Tim and the baby and be ok,” she says. And one day: “I want to visit other worlds. Do you think that’s a real thing?”

“This is making us nuts,” I tell her. But when I am staring at the water, I visit the small, Midwestern town where I went to college. I always thought I hated the place, though I keep remembering the downtown area where I would run in the mornings. I can see the way it looked as I circled around the Episcopal Church and decided to do one

more lap before turning onto the main street. The light wasn't right yet, but it would be in a few minutes when the sun would rise high enough to be reflected in the windows of the tall buildings and light up everything. That was when I liked it.

I try to think about other moments in the town, about the men before George, the places we went together. But all I can see is that gradual hill, the streetlamps on for just a second longer, all the lights turning green.

*

I have just caught a new kind of fish, brown and ugly, and I want to ask Yusuf what it is, but when I finally get the thing off the hook and into the bucket, they are all on the skiff, heading out. It is still surprising to me, the way they sometimes move quietly and all at once. Essien is the only one who stays and I walk up to him, my new fish jerking around in the bucket.

“Where are they going?” I say.

“Out,” he says. His eyebrows are up. “To do pirate things.”

I laugh. “Did you just tell a joke?” And he shrugs. “Do you know what kind of fish this is?” I ask, holding out my bucket.

He peers down at the brown creature coiled inside, the corners of his mouth turning down and I can't tell if he is recalling something, or just disgusted. I wonder if he's ever handled a live fish before. He is the only one here who might have grown up as a fisherman's son or an ambassador's.

“A kind of eel,” he says. “It's not good to eat.”

“It doesn't look like an eel,” I say.

“It is.” Instead of going below deck, he stands at the railing and lights a cigarette.

“I met my first wife on a boat,” he says. “I was coming back to port and she was playing on the dock with her brothers and one of them threw her in. She was very beautiful. Even screaming like that, wet like a rat.”

“How often do you get to see her?” Sandra asks.

“She is dead now. All my wives are dead now.” He looks at me while he says this. I think he wants me to ask if he had anything to do with these deaths. He would like me to think him capable of it and so I ask. He plays it very cool, even looking away and exhaling smoke. “I am the mediator,” he says. “I’m not a violent man.”

“That’s very cryptic,” I say and he looks pleased.

Sandra appears then. She’s been meditating for hours at the prow of the boat. She looks beautiful, her hair all sea-salty. Essien pretends not to notice. “How are the negotiations going?” she asks.

“We have lowered the price again,” Essien says and Sandra leans against the railing. “We are down to half a million now.”

“And how low are you prepared to go, exactly?” she asks. This is when she cries. No one talks about the bloody woman. I have been able to block her out of my thoughts for days now, though I don’t know about Sandra. Perhaps she doesn’t think about her at all. Perhaps that is the only thing she thinks about.

Essien shakes his head, snuffs out his cigarette, and goes below deck. Sandra stops crying, walks over and peeks into my bucket. The eel is still now. “You don’t cry,” she says to me. “You haven’t cried this whole time.” Which is true. I wonder how much

we have changed from our old selves. At the very least, we look different, harder. We have pared down, have been pared down.

*

Just before sunset, the crew returns and there is a man and a child with them, maybe about ten. I am not good with kids or guessing their ages. Essien looks annoyed and shoos us up to the bridge, telling us to keep out of sight. So Sandra and I lay on our stomachs and peer down as the two are guided onboard, given the tour, the speech about playing their roles properly. They are not taking it well. The child is wearing large sunglasses, but it is obvious that she has been crying. Even now she sniffles every once in a while. The man looks both frightened and angry and it has everyone on edge. Some of the pirates even have their guns out. "I don't like that," I say and Sandra nods.

When they go below deck, the pirates start moving their things onto the main boat. One of the things is a large, metal barrel. "Is that a keg?" Sandra squints. She laughs to realize that it is and the first Yusuf looks up and shushes her. Then he waves us down. "We need to move you," he tells us. It is necessary to keep a close eye on the new hostages, so they will have our room below deck. We will be put on the supply boat. And so our things are moved out, their things are moved in. It seems like a lot of junk, all the things. Especially if all you want to do is stare at the water. So I let a few things drop: an alarm clock, the green glass holding our toothbrushes.

"Christ, Elaine," Sandra says. "Pretend that we'll want that someday, ok? Just pretend." But I don't want it. I can't imagine wanting it.

“There is a little bit of gasoline, but only a little.” The first Yusuf stands on deck, watching as Sandra arranges things. There is a bad picture of Dad that someone took of him when he was reading one night, his chin down in an unflattering way. She props this up on the dash. “You could not get far away. We would catch you. Understand?” And we nod.

This is when everything explodes on the main deck. The man stumbles out from the cabin, making a sound like an animal. He is bleeding just above the ear. Then Essien appears. His face is tight in a way that we have not seen before and he is carrying a rifle, making long, deliberate strides across the deck. He flips the gun easily as he walks, like a baton, and the butt comes down on the man’s head in the same beat that Essien’s foot strikes the deck. I am amazed at the fluidity of his movements. The man stops making the noise and Essien looks at him for a moment, shakes his head, and goes back below. Yusuf hops over to help the man up. We can hear him offering words of advice, something about elevating his head, and the man issues groans or laughter.

Sandra and I sit very still and soon the girl is brought up and told to sit with us on the little boat. She has been crying for a while, so her face is swollen and it is hard to tell her age. “Have they killed him?” she asks Sandra. Children are always drawn to Sandra. She is pretty and maternal. “I think they’ve killed my dad. Have they?”

Sandra looks at her, then closes her eyes and starts to meditate.

“My name’s Elaine,” I say. “What’s yours.” I am awful with kids.

“Did you see his face? There is blood all over.”

“I don’t think they’ve killed him,” I say. “But you shouldn’t talk right now. It’ll be better if you don’t talk.”

*

I like sleeping on the small supply boat better than inside the cabin. The canvas awning over our heads is thinner than the fiberglass walls and ceiling. It doesn’t mask sounds.

The man, Ryan, is recovering nicely. Their ransom has already been negotiated, though Yusuf says that Essien has decided to wait until the man is fully healed. It wouldn’t do to hand him over all gashed up like he is now.

So I have to bide our time with the girl, whose name is Michelle. I make her fish with me, which I regret, even when I ban talking. She keeps sidling up to me, reminding me that she is there.

In the meantime, the pirates have made a project of finishing off the keg. They are actually having a bit of difficulty with this. The keg was purchased in Miami and en route to the Keys. Of course, this is where they were intercepted, so it’s relatively full. There can’t be any partying, Yusuf tells me. There are too many hostages now. They shouldn’t have taken on these last two, but it was too easy, with them just sitting in their path like that, alone and placid. So now the pirates have to pace themselves, a few cups with dinner, a few throughout the day. Michelle has taken to calling them lightweights, which I might find funny if it didn’t make her giggle like that.

“You could help out every once in a while,” I tell Sandra at night, both of us lying on the mats, looking up at the awning.

“Why? You like her so darn much,” Sandra says.

“I don’t is the thing,” I say. “She’s like an annoying pet—like someone else’s annoying pet that I have to take care of.”

This is when Sandra lights into me about energy levels. Apparently, mine are really bad.

“But you don’t even talk to her,” I say. “You just sit there.”

“I respect her,” Sandra says. “I send her energy. It’s more effective than you probably realize.”

I tell Sandra she’s full of it. Besides, I add, what about the pirates? They’re the ones who bring us food. That, and they haven’t touched us. They’ve even been relatively polite.

“Christ,” Sandra says. “Have you forgotten that we’re fucking kidnapped?”

This is when Yusuf, the older one, lands on our deck: we are being loud. “This is too much,” he says and pulls me up by the wrist. He does this gently, the way patient parents do with bad children, and tells me to jump onto the other skiff. “It’s onetwothreejump. You understand?” And I nod. “Onetwothreejump.”

And we land. Yusuf tells the others to make room for me. They scoot over, and I think I can decipher their grumblings now: *loud mouth*, *bed hog*, something that sounds like *sheep for a wife*. I lay on the mat, listening to the water slapping the boat, the breathing of the men around me settling into rhythm.

In the morning, I wake late. I have slept between the Yusufs and am covered in arms. The younger one has his leg draped over me, but moves, embarrassed, when I sit

up. I get up to make the coffee and find that Sandra has already done it. She and Michelle are sitting crossed-legged, draining the last bit from their cups. They don't open their eyes when I land, loud and clumsy, they just keep sitting there, their faces calm and smooth.

“Should she be having coffee?” I say, pouring my own cup.

“She's a nine-year-old hostage.” Sandra opens her eyes when I sit down next to her. “She can have coffee if she wants.” She takes a breath, smiles a little, and asks if I've slept well.

I say that I have. She has slept well, too, and now we are both annoyed by the other person's restfulness. I catch a lot of flounder that day while Sandra teaches Michelle to meditate. “You have to learn how to sit,” I hear her explain. “It's actually kind of hard, sitting.”

After dinner, Yusuf offers me a glass of beer and I hop onto the skiff to drink it. The beer is flat, but good. I never used to like beer, the weight of it fizzing in my stomach. But now it is satisfying, how heavy it is. No one says anything, except for Sandra and Michelle, who laugh sometimes from the other skiff. Over here, we are quiet. We are all peacefully drunk by the time we unroll our mats and lay down to sleep.

It is dark when one of the Yusufs crawls onto my mat with me, smelling like the cigarettes they've all been smoking. “Be quiet,” he says. I can't tell which Yusuf it is, but I don't mind. I try to think of George, but can't. This is different. It is easier, somehow.

In the morning, I still don't know which Yusuf it was. They are both asleep, one on his stomach, the other on his side with his back to me. I don't get any clues over coffee, either. Everyone acts just the same.

This is how it goes for the next few weeks: Sandra and me minding Michelle, Ryan below deck, me drinking beer with the pirates. We drop off Michelle and Ryan on a tangled beach in what must be Florida with their boat. We leave them with everything but their phones. "They will be rescued," Yusuf says as we haul their belongings to shore. "But not too quickly. We have to leave first." The pirates and I do the work of transporting the things from skiff to shore, slogging back and forth through the waist-high water. Ryan is made to stay on the boat with Essien. So is Sandra.

Before we leave them on the beach, Michelle stands in front of me and says goodbye. She gives me a hug because she knows she's supposed to, but I can tell she doesn't want to. I don't really want her to, either, but I put my hands on her back, like I'm reciprocating. Then she and Ryan walk away, down the beach. They look small and helpless and I feel sorry for them.

After Michelle is gone, all Sandra does is meditate. She just sits on the life vest with her eyes closed, the corners of her mouth sagging slightly, and I'm not sure she even stops to sleep. Or that she isn't sleeping the whole time. I leave some rice for her before bed and when I check it the next day, it is gone, though this doesn't mean anything. Anyone might have eaten it. She might have dropped it into the water.

I have figured out that it is the younger Yusuf that I'm sleeping with. It took me a while, until we started whispering to each other. I used to think that one whisper sounded

like another, but they don't. His is deep, a little bit hoarse. I ask where he comes from, if he is a real live Somali pirate.

“There are not good ships to pirate there anymore. That is why we've come here.” What he does tell me is that he has spent some time in DC, doing I don't know what. This and stories about his parents, how his father was starting to go crazy, appearing at a party completely naked.

“My parents are dead,” I tell him.

The next night, I tell him about George. I tell him about the trips we have taken, how we went hiking in Yellowstone last fall and he insisted on wrapping all our food in plastic bags and storing it in a cooler that he hoisted into a tree.

“I have a wife,” Yusuf says. “We are not in love either.”

I try to explain that this isn't what I meant, though maybe it is.

*

It takes a few more weeks to get our money. I don't know how he does it, but Tim comes up with a satisfactory amount: “a few hundred thousand,” according to Essien. And finally we are making our own trip toward shore on the skiff. Sandra is standing at the bow with an armload of things, which is all that is left. She must have given most of our stuff to Michelle. Or thrown it overboard.

*

I don't give interviews anymore. I have done a few of them. The reporters seem so genuinely concerned, so friendly. The first one, a woman with matches shoes and purse, cracked me right away. She was so empathetic, so eager and I talked until I

couldn't think of anything else to say. And, honestly, I don't mind spilling my guts. If only they wouldn't write those articles afterward that make me seem so strange: too still, too distant. I'm not, though. It's just that these reporters move so fast, paying attention to all the wrong things. They want to know what the pirates were like, the way they treated us, things that they said. And I told them about coffee, rice with meat, and the bloody woman who was thrown overboard. I have told them how, when they released us, Sandra jumped into the water too soon, like she did when she was a kid. She was ok. She has always been a good swimmer. I told them that George has been very supportive. All this is true.

They don't need me to make sense of it for them. They know what's what. It isn't necessary for me to talk about the things I have learned: where to hit a man depending on the amount of damage you want to inflict, or love and the ways that we miss it. How to identify fish by the size of their gills.

POISONOUS BIRDS

Anna used to run farther than this. Once, she ran most of the Chicago Marathon, passing out from dehydration at mile twenty-four. A cardiologist, seeing her eyes roll back, stepped out of the crowd and caught her mid-fall. “I saved your nose,” he said when she woke up. But that was years and years ago in a flat and windy place.

New Guinea is hillier and, of course, greener. There are hardly any people on this part of the island. Certainly no one to save Anna’s nose for her. Jack is back in Washington, trying to get more funding, and Joy and Malich are in the old lab on the mainland. So Anna lives in the Bougainville lab by herself, runs by herself, and tries not to think of the myth of the ancient Japanese soldiers who missed the retreat and lurk in the rainforest, or about the tribal fighting, which is real. She screams when a dog rushes out of the brush. It doesn’t seem like it will bite, but the bark is enough. The dog is an ugly animal, some kind of boxer mix, mottled black and brown.

“Stop,” Anna says to the dog. She stops running and tries to make herself look big. “Stop. Go home.” This is when two boys appear up the road, wearing bright polo shirts that are too big. They call the dog and it runs to them.

“Is this your dog?” she asks them. They nod. They are orphan boys. She has been warned against giving them hand outs: the government has been trying to institute a work program for them, but it isn’t going well. No one checks on anything out here. “I’d like you to keep a hold on him, please,” she says to the boys. “I’m afraid of dogs.” She isn’t afraid of dogs, she has a dog at home, but this seems to add some necessity to her request. The boys nod, and the older one—he cannot be more than twelve—curls his fingers

around a collar Anna is only now noticing. The younger one stands next to his brother, looking silent. He places his palm on the dog's side. He looks like a small adult: serious and unflinching.

Anna turns around and begins jogging again. When she is about a hundred yards away, she hears one of the boys yell *Go!* and they both begin cheering. She hears paws scratching over gravel. The boys laugh and the dog is very close now. Anna panics. She turns and plants her toe in muscle of its chest and hears it yelp. "You're little fuckers," she calls to the boys. She is angry, and the last two miles go fast.

When she reaches the lab, there are new birds in the net. Wallace, a yellow mutt, lies below the net. He wags when she approaches, but doesn't get up. Anna doesn't bother with the gloves. She untangles a bowerbird, a few bright parakeets, a bird of paradise. "Hello, Lovely," she says, tossing it upwards and it bursts into flight. Birds of paradise are what brought her to New Guinea, the thing that made her become an ornithologist in the first place. She was intrigued by their design, the antennae-like feathers and their odd pattern of flight: up down up down. But it was Jack who was in love with birds since he was nine. He was embarrassed to admit that it was the flash of their color, the loud clacking sounds they made. "There's a pretty rock," Anna had teased him once. "Should we go study that?"

"As opposed to the structure of the rock?" he poked her in the ribs. "It's a rock, Anna. It's really old sand." It was his proposal that got them here, studying birds of paradise and their mating rituals, the clacking dance they did.

Also in the net are two pitohuis—both of them males, one with a tag on its leg—and Anna holds them carefully, one in each hand, their heads poking out of her fists. One of them pecks at her thumb.

She pins one bird carefully against the counter with her elbow while she removes the tag from other, its beak open as if to feed. Then she puts them both in the cage with the rest. The cage smells sour.

Before she forgets, Anna inputs the tag numbers into a database that her lab shares with the one on the mainland. It is easier than e-mailing everyday. And she got rid of the phone almost a year ago. It quit working one day and she liked communicating via e-mail; it gave her time to phrase things just right. If anything is seriously wrong, she can always radio someone in town.

And now her hands are tingling. Anna moves quickly, careful not to touch anything else until she washes her hands and disinfects all the scratches. She wipes down the desk and keyboard with a bleached rag. Hooded Pitohuis are poisonous birds. She and Jack discovered this by accident a little over a year ago while they were collecting birds of paradise. They were graduate students then, in New Guinea just long enough to become thin with strange tans, still in love with ornithology and with each other.

Anna had been standing at the bathroom sink when Jack came in. She was letting the braids out of her hair; it was how she wore her hair in the daytime, sometimes streaked with lemon juice, so that she could appear at dinner with blonde waves. Tonight there were plans to go into town. It was the end of the Mt. Hagen show, the festival that

gathered all the islands' tribes together, and Anna had been wanting to see the legends acted out, to eat strange food and dance in the streets.

“God, my mouth burns,” Jack said, appearing in the doorway and reaching for the Listerine. Anna stood in place, undoing the other braid, letting Jack move around her. It was the way she'd learned to be with him and all his energy. He sometimes seemed to be everywhere at once. He spit, rinsed his mouth with water and spit again. He looked frantic. “I was just collecting birds and all of a sudden my mouth was burning. My hands are numb, too.” Jack held his palms up to her, as if she might do something. Anna squeezed the knuckle of his little finger hard enough that her own fingertips turned white. “Nothing,” Jack said.

She made him chew bread to soak up whatever was on the surface and after a half hour, he was fine again. “What do you think it was?” she said.

“I don't know,” Jack said.

“Do you think it's a bird?” She knew she shouldn't be excited.

“That would be awesome,” said Jack.

It was the Hooded Pitohui, a small dark bird with a bit of orange that looked a lot like the orioles Anna had seen all her life in Pennsylvania. In comparison to the birds of paradise, to most rainforest birds really, they looked drab and smelled awful. The natives called them “garbage birds” because of the stench and because they weren't good to eat. Anna took some skin and feather samples and sent them to be tested. And sure enough: batrachotoxin, the same neurotoxin found in poisonous dart frogs of South America. So Jack and Anna quit researching birds of paradise, Joy and Malich quit studying bower-

birds, and the whole crew focused on the pitohui, its flying patterns, its mating habits and diet. The question was in how they became poisonous. Jack wrote a couple grants and got enough funding to establish a smaller, newer lab in Bougainville, a New Guinean island so far into the ocean it ought to have been Melanesian property.

He and Anna designed the lab together: a sort of bungalow with a single bedroom, a single bathroom, and a kitchen with a breakfast nook. The laboratory was supposed to be a separate room, but they spent most of their time there, dragged a couch in so one could keep the other company. “The habits of the Oksanen-Dumbachers?” Jack would say. “Well, they’re strange birds.”

The first time Jack left to present their finds in Washington, it seemed that he was gone forever and Anna kept herself busy, working on the birds until she fell asleep on the couch. He would come back, have to leave again, and now when he is here, it is only for a visit. Now Anna sleeps on the couch because she is used to it.

After she washes her hands, Anna has some tea and a Muesli bar. She hates to cook; she orders the bars by the case. Her brother is visiting in a week, she remembers, and wonders briefly what she will feed him. He will probably happily eat the cereal bars. He’s that kind of kid. Or, more likely, he’ll turn into the uber boy scout and gather nuts and berries, turn them into a paste and that he shapes into a turkey—he’s like that, trying to appease the meat eaters without actually eating meat. This makes Anna laugh as she works. She has been focusing for the past few months on the bird’s diet, thinking that perhaps the poison is ingested and distributed throughout the body. This is more likely than the idea that they produce it themselves. There hasn’t been anything surprising in

their systems, the usual organs, the usual workings of things. So lately she has been itemizing the contents of their stomachs.

She retrieves the new, untagged bird from the cage, holding a cotton ball of chloroform to its beak, feeling the wings flutter inside her fist and then go still. It is the electrical impulse, she tells herself, the struggle is purely physiological, like a euthanized dog gasping for breath only because its lungs are shutting down. When the bird is finally still, she pins its wings to the dissection tray and opens up the abdomen, pinning down the flaps of flesh. The smell is worse, but the bird is perfect. She is always amazed when all the pieces are where they should be: heart and lungs and stomach like a pearl. Inside the stomach is nothing unusual, leaves and berries and what is more or less a whole beetle. Anna places each of these specimens in their own glass containers and labels them with the date. She is careful to always know the date. It is the first step to going crazy, she thinks, losing sense of time.

This is when Wallace starts to go nuts. He shoots up from his place under the table and is barking at the door and now Anna can hear the sound of an engine, of men's voices, a knocking and she freezes. This doesn't happen here. Jack isn't due for several weeks and, other than Jack, no one comes here.

She answers the door timidly, peeking around its edge at a tall kid in a T-shirt and cargo shorts. "Annie?" he says. It takes her a minute to recognize the kid as her brother. Of course it is Liam: eager eyes and broad smile. His face was actually used on a boy scout brochure about ten years ago. This is the face she sees now, even though his hair is matted and he looks exhausted.

“Liam?” Anna says. It doesn’t occur to her to push the hair back; instead, she cranes her neck forward and looks up into his face.

“Yeah,” he says.

“You’re early,” Anna says.

“It’s the fifteenth,” Liam says.

“Huh,” says Anna. This is when she realizes that she is supposed to host this kid. That, probably, she was supposed to pick him up from the airport. Her parents don’t know she doesn’t have a vehicle. If she told them this, they would want to know how she gets around and she would have to tell them she hitch hikes. They stand there, nodding at one another for a moment before Anna realizes he is waiting for her to let him in.

“How did you get here?” she asks, grabbing the duffel bag at his feet and walking through the house. He has never visited her here before. No one has, save for one globetrotting friend from college, a girl who stopped by on her way home from Australia. Liam follows her, his eyes adjusting to the dark.

“I told some guy at the airport about you. He seemed to know where you are and he let me ride in the back of his truck.” Anna imagines Liam describing her using words like “ornithologist” and “poisonous birds,” though all he had to say was “white lady.” He stands in the doorway, looking into the darkness of the room. “A great way to see the country. It’s really beautiful here.”

“It is,” Anna says. “It’s also the only way to see the country: that or backpack.”

“Anna, it reeks in here,” he says. “It smells like a sick room or something.”

“It’s the birds,” Anna explains. “They’re supposed to smell.” She points at the cage, but Liam is looking at the partially digested beetles in jars, the bird splayed open on the dissection tray like some grotesque art exhibit or worse, something she does for fun. She must look absolutely insane, like a serial killer with a collage of articles and string all over the wall.

“I’m examining their diets,” she calls from the bedroom, where she is placing the duffel bag, stuffing loose articles of clothing into closets and drawers. She doesn’t remember how much she has told him about what she does and she explains everything from the top: pitohuis are poisonous birds, et cetera, et cetera.

“Pitohui,” Liam says, wandering over to the cage. The birds hop around nervously. “Pitohui. It sounds like you’re spitting.”

“Charming,” Anna says, moving into the lab.

“I thought a poisonous bird would be more colorful,” Liam says, stepping closer to the cage. “Isn’t that what bright colors mean in nature? Danger? Shouldn’t these birds be, like, neon?”

“They don’t need to be,” says Anna. “I mean, would you eat them?”

“Good point,” says Liam. “They’d probably taste like ass.”

“Yes,” says Anna. “Ass.”

Liam turns around, smiling. He is determined to be good natured, but his face falls. “Anna, your leg,” he says. “You’re bleeding.”

Anna looks down and sees the patch of dried blood on her ankle. “Huh,” she says, exploring the wound with her fingers. It isn’t a bite, though the orphan’s dog must have

scratched her; she didn't feel a thing. She excuses herself to clean the scratch and remembers she still hasn't showered, so she does that, too. When she is clean and dressed, she finds Liam outside, scratching Wallace and eating an unripe papaya. "This is awesome," he grins at her. He stands up and hugs her. "Hello," he says.

"How long are you staying?" Anna asks and Liam shrugs, takes another bite of papaya.

Liam begins to run with her in the mornings. He is a good runner, just off his high school cross country team, but not used to the hills here. For the first week he keeps up with Anna, but just barely. It turns out he knows plenty about her work: he's read that scientists are trying to isolate the toxin. "They think they can use it to help stroke victims," he says, gasping for breath. "It was in *The Humanitarian*." They jog for almost another mile before he says, "Wouldn't that be great? Being able to help people?" His smile is the same one he had as a kid.

Anna wants to tell him that injecting a toxin into someone already half paralyzed sounds incredibly stupid. "I kind of just want to study birds," she says.

By the second week, he runs with her easily and by the third, he runs her back to the lab and then turns around to do a few more miles on his own. He wants to see more of the area and so Anna loads him down with binoculars and notebooks and takes him to the places she knows: a lagoon that is unbelievably blue, a valley that winds so far into the mountains they can't see the end of it. There is a famous plane crash in the mountains and lots and lots of caves. She points out birds to him, tells him the kind, what makes them

special. She tells him about birds of paradise and their strange design, the way their flight pattern looks like a sine wave.

She is working at classifying the berries from the bird's stomach when Liam returns from somewhere in the back of a pickup truck. He has a grocery bag with him and two boys—the same orphan boys who sicced their dog on her a few days ago. There is no sign of the dog now.

Anna stands in the doorway, blocking their entrance. “Do you remember me?” she asks them. The boys look at her and say nothing. They don't move their heads yes or no. They just stare at her. “I don't want them in the house,” she says to Liam.

“Jesus, Annie,” he says. He touches her shoulder and slides past her. Anna goes back to work and listens to him open the bag. It sounds like he is cracking eggs, chopping vegetables and mixing things together in a metal bowl. She hears the stove turn on and pretty soon she can smell the omelet. When did he learn to cook?

She hears him go outside and when she peeks out, she sees the three of them with empty plates and a pile of half a dozen Muesli bars. The younger boy is petting Wallace with his foot. “It's one thing If you want to buy things for these boys, but you should ask ask before you give away my food,” she says from the doorway.

Liam looks up at her, leans his head against the building. “It's not like you don't have enough,” he says.

“That's not the point,” Anna tells him. She stands there while the boys get up and leave, taking the Muesli bars with them.

Liam picks up their dirty plates. “Don’t worry,” he says, brushing by her on his way to the kitchen. “I’m sure they’ll leave you alone now.”

But the next day the boys are back and Liam is handing out more Muesli bars. That evening, while they are washing dishes after dinner, Anna tells him about the dog attack, but he disregards this. “Well there’s no dog now.” he says. “And besides, we have the opportunity to do some real good. We can actually help people.” And Anna rolls her eyes. “Christ, Anna. Your hand.” Liam grabs her wrist and thrusts it under the tap. She has cut her thumb without realizing it and the water runs bright red for a moment. “How do you not notice these things? Doesn’t it hurt?”

“No,” Anna says, which is true.

The boys are back the next day and Liam throws bottled water and some more Muesli bars into a backpack and they set out into the forest.

Anna, meanwhile, continues to work. She has identified the berries as unripe goji berries, a thing she has seen in bird’s stomachs often enough. The beetle, though, is a Choresine beetle. It is less common in bird diets, but prevalent enough for farmers on the island to complain about it. She puts all of this into the database and washes her hands.

At first she thinks she is out of soap because, when she pumps the dispenser, she can’t feel it in her palm. But the soap is there, a pile of pearlescent white. Then she realizes she can’t feel her hands at all. She claps them together, shakes them out, and regains some feeling, but not all of it. She goes to the keyboard and types something to see if she can: *My name is Anna Oksanen and my hands work.* She puts on her gloves and

finds an already dissected bird, making a delicate incision in the viscera surrounding the heart. The cut is perfect until the very end when she nicks the heart itself.

Of course it is the birds, she knows. She picks a feather from a dead bird and puts it in her mouth. Instantly, her tongue goes numb. She grinds the quill between her teeth, hearing the fibers coming apart but unable to feel it.

When Liam returns with the boys, she is still on the couch with the feather in her mouth, watching an awful film about bullfighting on the laptop. All around her are chocolate wrappers and used matches.

“What’s the matter?” Liam asks, and she holds out a palm and drops a lighted match into it. The match burns out quickly.

“I don’t feel a thing,” she says.

Liam is the one to radio Dr. Kibara, who comes out the next day in his beat up Saab. He takes some blood samples and tissue samples, but when Anna tells him about her work with the birds and the neurotoxin, he shakes his head and mutters something about her peripheral nervous system.

Liam sits outside with the boys, reading aloud random articles from a journal he happened to find on Anna’s shelf. This particular article is about Great Kiskadees in Brazil and their tendency to eat bats. “On one occasion,” she can hear Liam say, “a kiskadee flew from a perch and captured a bat in flight.”

“It might be permanent,” Dr. Kibara is saying. “We’ll have to run those tests before we know anything, but not working for a while couldn’t hurt.”

She e-mails this news to Jack who replies quickly: *You're like Marie Curie*. He says. *I feel we're about to prove something amazing*. This is her Jack, constantly amazed, constantly in motion. He tells her he will return as soon as he can, that he loves her, that he will buy her new hands. One thing is as true as another.

That night, Anna invites the boys inside and they all listen to Liam read about russet crowned Motmots, red-winged blackbirds, dusky flycatches. She makes hot chocolate for them and opens a bottle of wine, not really caring who drinks what. She looks at her hand cupped around the glass. She can feel something solid against her skin, but she doesn't feel the coolness of the glass, the smoothness of it. Her hand, she thinks, is just reacting to a muscle memory, not the actual stimulus of the glass. It is a little like being blind, she imagines, the way a blinded person can move around a familiar space because they remember where things are. But change around the furniture and they'll crash again and again.

"Maybe you should stop working," Liam says after the last article. "Just for a little bit." The younger boy—they still won't say their names or much of anything else—is asleep. The older one watches them as they talk, his eyes moving back and forth.

"Maybe I will," says Anna.

They go on more hikes, during which the boys appear and disappear at random. "Goshawk," the oldest one says, crashing onto the path in front of them and pointing up at what Anna is amazed to realize actually is a Grey Goshawk, its small orange feet side stepping along a branch.

"Yes," she says. "That's right."

“Kingfisher.”

“Yes.”

“Bowerbird.”

“Yes,” she says. “How do you know?” The boys point to Liam. He has been reading the journals aloud for weeks, he admits.

There is a cave ahead and they decide to go in. Everyone gets a flashlight and the boys rush in first, their lights are circles against the walls. Liam is ahead and Anna can see him for a while until she can't. She fumbles with the switch on her own flashlight, but of course she can't feel it and it is very dark now. She puts her arm straight out in front of her and moves it in an arc from one side to the other, only knowing that something is in the way when the movement is restricted. She expects that when she comes out of the cave, her hands will be cut to shreds. They're practically not hands at all anymore. They might as well be wings.