

The University of Southern Mississippi
The Aquila Digital Community

Dissertations

Summer 8-2010

Disappearing Children

Beth Lynn Couture
University of Southern Miss

Follow this and additional works at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/dissertations>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Couture, Beth Lynn, "Disappearing Children" (2010). *Dissertations*. 977.
<https://aquila.usm.edu/dissertations/977>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu.

The University of Southern Mississippi

DISAPPEARING CHILDREN

by

Beth Lynn Couture

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

August 2010

ABSTRACT

DISAPPEARING CHILDREN

by Beth Lynn Couture

August 2010

This collection of short stories is primarily concerned with the dynamic between adults and children—parents and their own children, teachers and their students, and other adult/child relationships. In each of the stories, children present a psychological or emotional challenge to the adults, one with which they are not always equipped to cope. They are a problem which cannot be solved easily, if it can be solved at all. On a formal level, the stories in this collection seek to blur the line between the mundane and the magical. Though the collection is riddled with the fantastic, at its center is the struggle of its characters to understand their existence and negotiate within the human world of relationships, hope and disappointment, and loss. The strange or magical elements underscore the characters' struggles to understand their own humanity.

COPYRIGHT BY
BETH LYNN COUTURE
2010

The University of Southern Mississippi

DISAPPEARING CHILDREN

by

Beth Lynn Couture

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

Approved:

Steven Barthelme

Director

Frederick Barthelme

Kate Cochran

Monika Gehlawat

Charles Sumner

Dr. Susan A. Siltanen

Dean of the Graduate School

August 2010

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my former dissertation director, Frederick Barthelme, my current director, Steven Barthelme, and my committee members, Dr. Kate Cochran, Dr. Monika Gehlawat, and Dr. Charles Sumner, for their support and advice. Your patience and help throughout this process has been invaluable. I would especially like to thank Frederick Barthelme and Steven Barthelme for their insight in fiction workshops and their help in making my stories better versions of themselves. You have challenged me to be a better writer and thinker, and I am grateful.

I would also like to thank Rie Fortenberry, who did her best to keep me sane throughout the last three years and without whom I would not have survived, and my fellow Center for Writers graduate students, especially Michelle Nichols, Lynn Watson, Beaux Boudreaux, Jeff Tucker, Josh Webster, and Chuck Campbell.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
INTRODUCTION.....	v
THE GARDEN.....	1
THE WOLF.....	18
THE HOLE.....	31
THE MEEK.....	38
FLOAT.....	41
EVOLUTION.....	43
THE SECOND SIGHTING OF SAINT ANTHONY.....	54
MARCH.....	70
THE GIFT.....	85
THE DISAPPEARING CHILDREN.....	97

INTRODUCTION

Probably the most memorable thing anyone has ever said about my creative work wasn't actually said in reference to my fiction, but to my drawing. It's also the most complimentary thing anyone has ever said about my work, and it has to do with my ability to lie. I haven't drawn or painted in years, but I was an art minor in college and took quite a few drawing classes. Hollins University was known for its traditional aesthetic in just about all forms of art, and its visual artists were not expected to stray from the representational. In Drawing I, we worked mostly from live models, but also did still lifes and landscapes. No one attempted to draw anything that didn't "look like" the object it was supposed to. While most students could draw a human body that looked somewhat like the model's or a vase of flowers that looked like it had weight and wasn't just floating in space, I could not. At first, I tried. I sat on my gray metal stool and scratched away at my paper with pencils and charcoals, determined to make a face that looked like a real face and not a mask. I tried to capture shadow and depth, the way light creates a sense of dimensionality. I kept trying. Nancy Dahlstrom, my professor, looked at what I did and told me to pay attention to what my classmates were doing, to try to imitate them. I did. It didn't work.

At one point we had to get into pairs and draw each other. I partnered up with my friend Erika, who with her dark blue eyes and perfectly straight nose was quite possibly the most classically beautiful person I had ever seen, and we faced each other and drew for almost the entire class period. I focused on shapes, the slight asymmetry of her eyes and the way her nose cast a patch of shadow on her upper lip. I tried to make my drawing look like Erika, like the real thing. I didn't want to idealize, because that was cheating.

That wasn't real. At the end of the class, we had to show each other what we had drawn. Erika revealed a kind version of my face, a version in which my eyebrows were tame and my forehead wider, my eyes bigger and more open. She had smoothed out the fat on my cheeks, giving me noticeable cheekbones. It wasn't me, but I appreciated what she had done. She hadn't tried for complete truthfulness, but for the ideal. An image of Beth, but one of Beth as she should be. Beth softened by the artist's touch. Somehow Erika knew how to balance drawing what she saw with drawing something that was cohesive as a whole. It was flattering, but it still looked enough like me to be recognizable.

I, on the other hand, had also created an image that didn't look like what it was supposed to, but mine wasn't at all flattering. The lines I had sketched, trying to capture the curvature under the eyes, had become prominent wrinkles. The shadowing under the nose could have been a Hitler mustache. Instead of a strong forehead, I had created one that was bulging and misshapen, like a Neanderthal's. I had tried to make an image that was true to life, that showed my subject as she was, but had ended up creating something that looked nothing like her. All the lines and angles were there, but my lack of skill had made them into something different, something grotesque. The girl in the picture was a collection of lines and shapes and weird angles that didn't go together at all. I'm reminded of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, but whereas Picasso's women look intentionally weird, mine did not. It looked like a picture a mean-spirited child might make of an aunt she hated. Erika looked at the drawing, then at me, and then asked, "Is that really how you see me?" I tried to explain what I'd done, but she and Nancy just stared at me. They didn't understand how I could make someone so beautiful into something so ugly, simply by trying to draw what was there. I don't understand it either.

Something in my brain couldn't translate what I saw into a cohesive, visually interesting whole.

After the Erika failure, I stopped trying to draw what was there, and instead drew my own interpretation of it. I didn't care if what ended up on the paper looked like what it was supposed to look like, as long as I was happy with the image itself. I simplified figures down to their basic outlines and focused on shapes. I wasn't drawing flowers or fruit anymore, but flower-and-fruit-like objects. I embellished where I wanted to and left out what I wanted to leave out. Instead of feeling chained to representation, I felt like I was actually *making* something. Everything I did started to feel like it was a thing in its own right instead of a drawing *of* something, one which was subordinate to the object of which it was a representation. Nothing I did looked like anything else in the room, but it looked like mine. I don't really know why I started working like this, but I think it must have come from the realization that I couldn't do it any other way.

Before this realization, I was convinced I had no talent when it came to visual art.. Once I stopped trying to make things look "real," however, I found that I trusted myself more. My instincts, when I followed them, were actually pretty good most of the time. My work wasn't going to end up in a gallery, but it was interesting. If anything, it reflected my own interest in what I was doing, which was more than I could ever say about what I'd been up to before. My professor and classmates reacted differently to it too, talking about its energy and playfulness instead of my complete inability to do what I was supposed to do.

This is where the comment about lying comes in, the comment that for some reason has stuck with me for the last twelve years and is the only thing I could imagine

talking about in a ten page discussion of my creative aesthetic. I don't remember what I was drawing, but Nancy was walking around the room looking over our shoulders as usual, and she stopped behind me and started smiling. "You don't know how to make something look like it's supposed to at all," she said, "but you lie really well." I laughed and thanked Nancy, and continued with what I was doing. I didn't know what to think about the comment at the time. It seemed pretty clear to me that Nancy was happy I had found a way to survive in her class, and I was just glad I was no longer expected to try to do what everyone else was doing. It was kind of shocking, but in a good way. I think about it now, though, and I realize that Nancy was giving me permission to make art in my own way. She acknowledged my talent, and told me it was okay to lie, to break away from what was real, as long as what I did made sense to me.

This experience was revolutionary for me. Like I said, I grew up around people who did what they were told, and who lived in the "real" world. My parents are intelligent, interesting people, but they want to see things as they are, not as they could be. They value realism and practicality, not magic. I always knew this wasn't the way I thought, but my way of thinking had never really been validated before. I lived in a small, working class town where most people didn't read or make art. They thought about work, relationships, and paying the bills, not the nature of reality. They appreciated honesty in the most basic, bland sense of the word. I was considered smart, but weird. They didn't trust me. So when someone—a teacher, no less—told me I was a liar and it was a good thing, it took a long time to process. I'm still processing it, still trying to understand the freedom it gives me, and the responsibilities.

My Hollins Drawing I experience closely parallels what has happened to me as a writer. I have written “realist” stories, stories in which I tried to imitate life as I know it, but they always seem strange and awkward—and not in a good way, not in a way that makes any kind of sense or that would make anyone want to read them. I’m a fairly decent writer, but when I try to write a story that has true to life characters in true to life situations, any talent or skill I might have is lost. I don’t know exactly why, but I think it has to do with growing up hating the life I saw around me and wanting to escape from it.

This is not going to become a story about my horrible childhood, because I didn’t have one. My parents are still together, I was never abused or neglected as a child, and I never suffered any real trauma. I was a weird, anxious kid who cried too much. I was—and still am—highly sensitive and neurotic, a perfectionist whose fear of failure often cripples me. But my childhood was as uneventful. And the lives of the people around me were uneventful, too. Painfully so. My parents’ universe consisted of work, television, cleaning the house, and sleep. Occasionally there were fights with my sister, but nothing much happened. They didn’t go anywhere particularly interesting, and aside from reading Stephen King novels, did nothing to escape from the mundane. In fact, they seemed to embrace it, afraid, I think, of something happening that might challenge or scare them.

As a child I longed for something—anything—to happen to disrupt the daily routine. I read adventure stories, fantasy and horror novels, and dreamt about places and people and animals that didn’t exist, that couldn’t exist. I didn’t always imagine pleasant things, but I found escape in them nonetheless. Anything that wasn’t the world I saw around me every day was fine. I guess I still find real life disappointing. I wish I didn’t. I don’t want to be an escapist, and I certainly don’t have any sympathy with people who

think too much about mythical beings and space travel. But I can't help looking for something else—some glimpse of the strange and fantastic—in the midst of every day life. I'm no longer interested in straight fantasy or simplistic magic (thank God), but in the skewed, reality that is recognizable as such and yet is also recognizably strange, off somehow.

The writing I am most attracted to is, not surprisingly, magic realism—fiction that engages with reality but also challenges the reader's sense of what that reality actually is, that acknowledges the mundane and twists it to make it strange. I read Garcia Marquez, Borges, Calvino, and Aimee Bender, and I see in their work a life that makes some kind of sense to me. The mundane and the magical exist side by side. They rely on each other to survive, rather than competing with each other for space. I appreciate writers who change the shape of the real in their work, who experiment with the representation of time and physical space. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Carole Maso's *AVA* come to mind here, in that both novels deal with mundane situations and realistically drawn characters, but seek to represent them in ways that press the boundaries of realism. Through reading Woolf and Maso, I learned that the real in fiction doesn't necessarily equal the mundane, and that even the mundane can be written about in such a way that makes it magical. This isn't something new, or even that interesting. Most writers don't have to work so hard to understand this. But for someone who struggles against thinking in binaries, it was a powerful revelation.

My first workshop in the Center for Writers was horrible. I had turned in a banal and ridiculous ghost story, one in which the spirit of the main character's dead mother howled like a cat and left weird gauzy material everywhere she went, and I got called out

on it. The story was anything but realist in nature, but its lack of realism didn't make it any more interesting than the most banal of factory stories. It was an exercise in cliché, in strangeness with no emotional weight. Looking back on it, I'm ashamed by the story, ashamed by the fact that I took the easy way out, by my inability to make a story that was both magical and sophisticated, that wasn't something you would find on a thirteen year old boy's bookshelf. I went home and sat on the couch for hours crying, convinced that this was not the place for me. I thought in binaries at the time—that fiction was either realist or non-realist, and non-realist automatically meant interesting. I couldn't understand how a ghost story—something inherently weird and supernatural and spooky—could be boring. Clearly, the class was wrong. They had read too much Chekhov, too much Raymond Carver. I was in the wrong place. My work would not be appreciated by these people unless I gave up my own aesthetic and toed the line. I wasn't willing to do this.

After a night of trying to figure out how I could make my escape from this dry, realist hell, I made an appointment to talk with Rick about the story. I'm not sure what I wanted to accomplish with this meeting, but I guess I wanted a chance to explain what I was trying to do with the story, to show that I wasn't illiterate or a terrible writer. I was defensive in the meeting, on my guard. I remember saying I didn't know why I had been accepted into the program, because clearly my aesthetic and Rick's didn't match up. "I just don't think I can write what you want me to write," I said. I can only imagine how spoiled and petulant I sounded. But Rick didn't seem fazed by this. "You can write whatever the fuck you want," he said, "but you just have to do it well." When he said it, it sounded so simple, so forgiving, and I'm still trying to wrap my brain around it.

I worked like hell to revise the ghost story, cutting out the gauze and the howling, trimming a lot of unnecessary descriptions and purple prose, and taking Rick's suggestion of making the ghost mother more real (and therefore creepier, more haunting, a character that challenged reality instead of defying it altogether). By the final draft, the mother, who had started out as the kind of ghost you would see in an episode of Scooby Doo, was actually an interesting, sympathetic character. She was still a ghost, but she seemed real in a way that made her engaging to read about. She was no longer a cliché. I admit, as I revised I didn't think it would work. I worried that I was going back into "do what they tell you" mode by not listening to my own original instincts and instead going along with what someone who didn't know my work or my vision for it said to do. After reading over the final draft, however, I realized that I had written a much better story than what I had originally workshopped. I couldn't—and still can't—believe that one even came from the other.

My time in the Center for Writers has been full of defiance and frustration (mine), patience (my professors' and colleagues) a lot of bad writing (mine again), and a few successes. I haven't written everything I would have liked to write, and what I have written hasn't always been as strong as I would like, but I've learned a lot, and I have begun to understand why I do what I do as a writer. I have completed a fairly decent draft of a novella as well as this collection of stories, along with some odds and ends that aren't included in either project. I plan to continue what I've started with the last five stories in this dissertation and end up with a novel or possibly a collection of linked stories. There is a good deal of the mundane in this collection. My characters lead isolated lives for the most part, lives in which very little happens—until something does,

and that event shakes the foundation of what they believe in and care about. This, more than anything, is the role of magic in my work. I don't want my ghosts to just float around and be ghostly; I want them to affect the living humans in the stories, to truly haunt them. That is what magic does—it touches us and haunts us. It reminds us that there is something in the world, something within ourselves, that we don't understand. I've become a much better liar than I used to be. I know that all lies require something real to ground them, or they just won't be believable. I also know that no matter what kind of fiction you write, it has to be believable.

Like Nancy's calling me a good liar, my experience workshopping my first story as a Center for Writers student made me think about the possibilities involved with creating art, and my responsibility as an artist to do the best work I can, regardless of what kind of work it is. Similarly, these experiences also made me realize that more than anything or anyone else, I was limiting myself by thinking I had to do one particular thing to make my art work. I can be a liar if that's what I want to be, in that I don't have to make representational drawings or stories. I can make weird things happen to my characters, can even create worlds that contain elements of magic. I can refuse to privilege the mundane. In doing so, however, I have the responsibility of creating work that isn't just an expression of my way of seeing the world, but that also engages others in this expression.

THE GARDEN

Whaley has gotten strange since it happened. Richard tries to ignore it, but he hears him talking to himself in his room late at night. Richard watches from the window sometimes when the boy goes outside. He always goes straight to her garden—what is left of it—and sits in the dirt. He talks to himself then, too, but mostly he just sits, digging into the ground with his fingers. He is fifteen and gangly, taller now than his father and already stoop-shouldered. When he comes into the house he goes straight to his room. Sometimes he looks at Richard as he passes him, but most of the time he doesn't.

Whaley has always loved dirt, just like his mother used to. Those two would be out in the garden for hours, digging and weeding and planting seeds Richard would buy from the Burpee catalog as a surprise. He would watch them from the window, like he watches Whaley now, would wave to them as they wiped their faces on their sleeves and squatted in the soil. Jenny had always loved to garden, as long as he'd known her, and the first thing she did when they bought their house was start digging in the backyard. He had helped her then, had bought spades and shovels and rakes at the feed store, and dirtied his hands with the rich dark soil they bought in fifty pound sacks to spread over the ground. Pretty soon the garden covered half the small yard, and then there was almost no free ground left. Richard had never seen a garden so full. Jenny planted every kind of vegetable that would grow in North Carolina ground, and roses, sunflowers, tulips, violet-puffed hydrangeas, tiger lilies, and flowers he had never seen before and whose names he still didn't know. At night she read gardening books, and as soon as the sun was up, she

was outside with new seeds to plant and baskets to collect the ripe vegetables. She was always out there, summer through fall, and there were even plants she grew through the mild winters. She was happier there than anywhere else, and sometimes Richard thought she was *only* happy in the garden. She paced like an animal when she had to be indoors.

In the first years, he would come out with her in the morning on Saturdays and Sundays and not leave until late afternoon. He bought a wide-brimmed hat and thick gloves, and his hands ached from digging. Later, he would watch her as she worked, would yell to her from the kitchen window or the screen door to come in for lunch, then to come in, it was getting dark—but early in their marriage he helped her, and he was glad to do it. He had wondered sometimes, even in the first years, if she still loved him, if she ever had—if she loved anything but her garden. She never seemed to notice anything but seeds and dirt. After she had planted everything she could think of, everything the yard would hold, Jenny built a low stone wall around the garden. She modeled it after pictures she had seen in her landscaping books, and called it her English wall. It took her three months to build, and when it was completed, she set up tables and chairs on the back porch and hung paper lanterns in the trees, and gave a garden party. Jenny put on her best sundress and served wine and tiny sandwiches and stuffed mushrooms to all the neighbors. She told them all that they were welcome to visit the garden any time they liked, but none of them ever did after that night.

When Whaley was born, Jenny would take him out into the yard with her, would put him in the bassinet, then the playpen, then the little wind-up swing they'd bought at a yard sale, and she would kneel in the dirt while he gurgled and smiled at her. When he was old enough to walk, he would help her, patting the ground with his fat fists, grasping

weeds and throwing them at the wheelbarrow next to where they knelt. The boy could stay out as long as she did, never complaining or crying or getting tired. In the evenings sometimes, they wouldn't even want dinner when they came in. They would bring cucumbers, peppers, onions, and tomatoes in with them, wash them and cut them up, and eat them, with milk to wash them down. Jenny would laugh at Richard, tell him he could have his pork chops or hot dogs or whatever he'd made, but she and Whaley would have their salad. If he was sullen because he had cooked and felt rejected, she would feed him slices of tomato until she forced him to smile at her. Later, he would sit at the kitchen table by himself and eat his food until he couldn't hold any more.

In the daytime, he would watch them from the kitchen window. Jenny never worried about Whaley getting sunburned, and so Richard would pay close attention to where the sun was in the sky, and just before it was directly overhead, he would go out into the garden and slather his son with sunscreen. Whaley hated the feel of it on his skin, the smell, would squirm and cry and pull away, into his mother's arms. Jenny always rolled her eyes when he came outside, would cuddle Whaley close and tell him not to worry about his worrywart daddy and the nasty smelly stuff, and she would glare at Richard, tell him he was a fussy old grandmother. They argued over this at night, and over so many other things. Over Whaley. Jenny screamed at him sometimes, said he was just jealous of her bond with their son, that he couldn't stand seeing them having fun together.

"Look at me," she'd yell, pulling up the sleeve on her nightgown to show him her brown skin, "Whaley will never have to worry about skin cancer, so just leave him alone! He doesn't want you touching him." Richard would stare at her—he remembers thinking

in those moments that she was crazy, the way her eyes were so cold and so hateful—and finally she would calm down. She would put her hand on his face and say she was sorry, she knew he was just trying to help, but he was doing more harm than good.

And now he and his son barely speak to each other, except when Richard gets into one of his moods. Then he can't do anything but talk.

“Do you know what they said before the trial, when they confessed?” he asks Whaley when the two of them are eating dinner. “Those men. Have I told you?”

And Whaley gazes in front of him, then down at the table. “Yes, you've told me.”

“They weren't even sorry,” Richard says, and his face feels cold, like rubber, “the lawyers said you could tell by their eyes.” He hates himself for this, for telling Whaley everything he wishes he didn't know. And he knows Whaley hates him—he must—but he can't help feeling it must be worth it somehow.

“Do you know what they said?” he asks again, “They said she shouldn't have been out there by herself, if someone had been with her they would have just let her go on by. They said her husband should have been with her. She was by herself, such a pretty woman out late at night, and they couldn't help themselves. They didn't mean to do it, but they just couldn't help it. They said it was as much my fault as theirs.”

Richard tells his son everything about that night, his quiet son, who had always loved his mother best. He doesn't want to say the words he says, but he's afraid that if he doesn't say them, he'll never say anything. He can't imagine living in the house in complete silence, and it is this that makes him talk.

“Whaley,” he says, “she was hit over and over until you couldn't even recognize her. They hit her with their fists, then with rocks they found. They hit her until they were

out of breath, until they didn't even know what they were doing anymore." Whaley listens, his blond head turned toward the floor, muddy brown eyes never meeting his father's. He always listens, never says a word in return, and when his father is finished, he looks at the empty space next to him at the table and then down at his hands and nods gently. This is the way it has been since it happened, now almost two years ago. Richard hates himself for telling his son the things he tells him, hates himself for the pictures that creep into his head when he looks at the boy. Jenny, screaming and struggling, her arms held over her head. Leaves and twigs in her hair. A man, younger than Richard, handsome and stupid and sinister, leaning over her, gripping her wrists and panting. He shakes his head, and the image clatters against his skull. He feels like he's conjuring her. When he talks about her, it's like she comes back, just for a moment. He can't stand it. Sometimes he thinks he sees her sitting beside Whaley as he talks. Whaley doesn't look at him, he never looks at him, and Richard would swear someone else is in the room the way the boy concentrates on the spot next to him. He watches his son and his throat clenches, and he can't not speak.

His father is talking again, running his hands through his thinning hair, scratching the stubble on his chin, and talking. He talks so much sometimes that Whaley thinks he must be going insane, he must be losing it completely. He goes on and on and on until finally he's worn himself out, and then he just sits there staring at the wall. He has told Whaley a hundred times, a thousand, about the night his mother was killed, and every time he does it Whaley wants to hit him, to beat him until he shuts up, but instead he sits quietly, except when he whispers to her.

He asks his mother, “Did it really happen that way?” and she, sitting beside him the whole time his father tells his stories, nods her head.

“What did you think about?”

“I didn’t think about anything. I wanted to go home.”

“But you were leaving us. That’s what Dad told me. You needed time away from him.”

“But as it was happening, all I wanted was to come back.”

His mother is beautiful, just like always. She and Whaley have the same blonde hair, the same tanned skin. When they would go out somewhere together, when she was alive, everyone would comment on how much they looked alike. “His mother’s son,” they called him, and his mother would put her hand on his head and smile.

Finally, it’s over for the night. His father is tired and quiet. The dishes are still out from dinner, and he sits with his head in his hands over his empty plate. Whaley gets up and begins to clear the table. He scours the dishes under hot water, and his mother stands behind him with her hands on his shoulders and her face pressed into his back. He can barely feel her breath.

He goes into the garden, where nothing remains but the stone wall. Whaley tried to take care of it after she died; he watered it every day and pulled weeds and tended it just like she had, but one day his father tore it up. Whaley came home from school and it was gone, the tomato vines and pepper plants and flowers and herbs torn out of the ground and thrown into a metal barrel. The soil had been trampled, heavy boot marks carved into its surface. When he went into the house, his father was sitting on the couch, holding a handful of dirt. “She loved it so much,” he said. “I just couldn’t stand it

anymore.” Whaley sits in the middle of it, where the summer squash and cucumbers used to be, and runs his fingers through the soil.

“Whaley,” his mother says, and he knows she is standing over him. He looks up at her. “It’s time to start planting again.” She walks through the garden and squats on the ground, looking at him. “We could start small, maybe just some tomatoes, a few squash. Some marigolds, stuff that doesn’t take much care. The compost in the bucket over there’s probably lost some of its nutrients, but we can always add to it. Why don’t we go down to the feed store tomorrow and pick up some seeds?” She walks through the garden and measures, plotting out the land. She tells Whaley to write down the numbers she calls out, and he writes them on his hand. Later, when he gets ready for bed, he washes his hands and blurs the numbers so he can no longer read them. He holds his hands up to his face and tries to remember what he wrote, but he can’t remember anything.

The next day Whaley sleeps through most of his classes and only wakes up for gym in the afternoon. He runs around and around the track, his chest and legs and arms burning, until his teacher sends another student after him to tell him it’s time to quit.

“You look like shit,” Greg says as he jogs up to him. “You’re running too hard.”

Whaley ignores him and keeps running until he can’t breathe anymore, until his legs practically buckle underneath him. He sits down on the track, certain he’s going to faint, but he doesn’t. He keeps his head between his knees, and his breath finally slows down. Greg is still standing in the spot where Whaley left him, and when he sees Whaley sit down, he walks over to him.

“You’d be a good runner if you paced yourself,” he says, then reaches down and grabs Whaley’s arm to help him up. Whaley nods at him, and they walk back to the gym.

His teachers have complained to the principal about him, but Whaley overheard him telling them they should just leave him alone. “You know what his family was always like,” Mr. Wilkens said, “and then his mother...” Whaley had been listening at the door of the office, but he ran as fast as he could back down the hall and out the doors. He remembers wanting to never come back, and he wouldn’t have if she hadn’t begged him, if she hadn’t told him he would break her heart if he didn’t.

Richard has put away the pictures from their wedding, from vacations and day trips and just regular days, and has donated her clothes to the Salvation Army. He went through her jewelry, the small gold earrings and bracelets, the emerald ring he gave her the day Whaley was born. His fingers were rough and callused, and he could barely feel the chains and bands he held. This was the hardest part. He didn’t know what to do with all of it. He could give her clothes to charity, so he forced himself to stuff them into garbage bags, to pull them off hangers and not bury his face in them. He forced himself to forget that she had worn them. But the rings, the necklaces. She never wore jewelry when she was alive, but she would take it out sometimes, clean it with a cloth and a gray bottle of polish, drape it against her skin like playing dress up. He buried her with her wedding ring on her finger, though she wasn’t wearing it when she died, and put the emerald in his dresser drawer. He sent the rest of the jewelry to her sister in Louisiana without a note.

The house is free of everything she owned, but sometimes Richard can still smell her. He still finds her hair at the bottom of the washing machine and in the sheets and pillows on their bed. He wakes up with it wrapped around his fingers, in his mouth. It

was only two years ago. He remembers when the police found her. Three in the morning, and the deputy came to the door the night after she disappeared. Richard had even gone to look for her, driving back and forth on Mill's Creek Road, stopping every few feet to look through the weeds on the side of the road, but he didn't go far enough. Just eight more miles, and he would have found her himself. Deputy Calloway said her car had been pushed into the overgrowth, but he'd known what he was looking for and saw it from the road. She was lying in the woods, naked and bloody. If Richard had driven just eight more miles he would have seen her himself. He tells his son he could have found her.

He knows he has to get away. In two days it will be exactly two years since she was found. He doesn't know if he can be in this house when the day comes. He is afraid of what might happen. His boss at the insurance company has told him to take as long as he needs—to go for a week, maybe even two, if that's what he wants. Richard knows they all think of him as fragile, but he doesn't care. He keeps his mouth shut because they have been kind to him, but all he wants is for someone to know what he knows.

He has put everything away that could remind him of her, but he's afraid one day he'll come home—from work, from this trip he hasn't planned yet—and find it all back again: her dresses and blouses hanging in the closet, her shoes, the prints by Van Gogh and Monet that he hated, but which she insisted on hanging on the walls, their photographs. He's afraid that one day the bathroom will be filled with dark green bottles of honeysuckle scented bubble bath, with jasmine shampoo. It scares him more to think of her coming back than it does to think of her gone. He can't imagine what he would say to her.

When Whaley comes home, she's there waiting for him, as always. He has asked her why she doesn't follow him to school, why she always stays at home, but she never answers. He goes into his bedroom and lies down, and she sits in the chair next to the window.

"How was your day?" she asks, and he shrugs. She comes over to sit on the edge of the bed, and strokes his hair. She used to do this to get him to sleep when he was younger, and it still works. Her fingers are cool, and Whaley sleeps.

Richard calls his sister Melinda in Raleigh when he gets home from work. She and her husband would be happy to have him stay a while, as long as he wants, and Whaley too. They can even come tomorrow if they want to.

"Do you think Whaley will come with you?" Melinda asks, and Richard knows she thinks he won't.

"I'll ask him," he says, "but he probably won't. Why would he want to go on vacation with his old man?" Richard laughs, trying to sound casual. "Besides, he has school." He knows what Melinda is thinking, and he doesn't want to talk about it. When they are off the phone, though, he can't stop thinking about his son. They could talk during the three-hour drive, and maybe being around his aunt and uncle would do Whaley good. Jenny's death can't possibly be the only thing he can talk to his son about. Maybe, Richard thinks, this change of scenery would be the beginning of something new for him and his son. Maybe they could just forget about Raleigh and just drive until they

find somewhere completely new. They could even move there if they both liked it enough and start everything over. It's time, he knows, it has been time for months now.

Whaley is asleep in his room, and Richard knocks on the door. "Whaley," he calls through the thick oak, "can you come out here?"

There's a pause, and then Whaley opens the door. "What is it?" He looks confused, like he looked when he was a little boy and Richard would have to wake him up when he fell asleep on the couch before bedtime. His face is red and lined with pillow marks.

"Let's go in the living room for a minute," Richard says, and his mouth feels so pasty his tongue can barely form the words. He swallows.

"Uh, sure. Give me a second, okay?" Whaley rubs his eyes and goes past his father into the bathroom.

Richard gets a glass of water from the kitchen for himself, and one for Whaley. He goes into the living room and waits on the couch. When Whaley comes out of the bathroom, his face and shirt are damp, but he looks more awake. He sits down in the armchair across from his father.

"What's up, Dad?" he asks, and Richard is surprised by how casual he sounds.

"Listen, Whaley, I know you know what tomorrow is, and I know you don't want to talk about it. That's not what I wanted to talk to you about."

Whaley looks at him and nods. "Okay."

"I want to get away from here for a little while, maybe even a couple weeks," Richard says, watching his son. "Your Aunt Melinda and Uncle Paul have said we could come down to Raleigh and stay with them for as long as we wanted, but I was thinking

maybe we could just go on a trip, like the road trips my friends and I used to take in high school, you know, just driving until we decide to stop. I think it might be good for us both to get away from here for a while.”

Whaley watches him as he fumbles, and finally says, “I’ve got school, Dad. I can’t just leave for two weeks halfway through the year.”

“I’m sure I could talk to your principal and your teachers,” Richard says, “that wouldn’t be a problem.”

“I don’t know,” Whaley says, not looking at Richard, “I really don’t think I want to. No. I don’t want to go.”

“But we can go wherever you want,” Richard says, and his stomach starts to hurt. “We don’t have to go to Raleigh, or even anywhere in North Carolina. We can go to Virginia, or Tennessee, or really wherever you want.”

“Why don’t you go, Dad, if you want to? Without me. I don’t want to leave. I don’t need to.” Whaley seems nervous too. His face is pale and determined, and he won’t look at Richard at all anymore. He stares at the air next to him. Richard knows he won’t convince him, but he can’t stop.

“Please, Whaley,” he says, trying to keep from raising his voice, “I really want you to go.”

“No. I can’t. I’m sure you’ll have a better time by yourself.” Whaley stands up and turns to go back to his room.

“It’s one day away,” Richard says, “two years ago when they found her. Do you remember that night, Whaley? The police officer at three in the morning, and I thought she would be home in a few days after she cooled down, but those men stopped her and

then they did those things...they took turns..." He's just talking now. He can't help it. He knows he'll never be able to stop. He hears the door to Whaley's room slam, and he knows it's over.

His father left a note saying he would be at Melinda and Paul's for a week or so, and left their phone number. Underneath the note, Whaley finds an envelope with a hundred dollars in cash in it. "In case you need it" is written on the envelope. Whaley shows the money to his mother. "What do you think he wants me to do with this?" he asks her.

"I don't know," she says, "I don't understand him anymore."

Whaley looks through the kitchen cabinets, and then the refrigerator for something to make for breakfast. He finds his father's packages of cookies and Nabisco cheese and crackers and potato chips, a chicken pot pie in the freezer, but nothing he can eat. Nothing that wouldn't make his stomach hurt. "I'm going to the store," he says, "I'll be back in a while."

It's a warm day even though it's the end of October, and he decides the two mile walk to Baylor's Grocery will be good. His father should already be in Raleigh, and Whaley wonders what he has told Melinda and Paul about why Whaley isn't there.

At Baylor's, he picks out cucumbers, tomatoes, onions, and green and red peppers—almost a week's worth. The elderly cashier talks to him as she rings him up.

"I remember you," she says, squinting at him over her thick glasses, "you're Jenny Tate's son. How are you and your poor daddy doing?"

"We're fine," Whaley says, holding out the money for the groceries.

“We were all so shocked by what happened,” she says, “I still can’t believe it. Your mother was such a pretty girl.”

“She’s beautiful,” Whaley says.

The cashier looks at him, and then goes on. “Well, if you ever need anything, all you have to do is ask. I know it’s been hard for you, but we’ve all been through our tragedies.”

Before she can say anything else, Whaley has taken the bag of vegetables, put his ten dollar bill on the counter, and has left the store. He is halfway home before he stops running.

When he gets back to the house, he puts his vegetables away in the refrigerator.

“Don’t you remember what I’ve always told you?” his mother says, behind him when he straightens up, “they’ll lose their nutrients. Not that any of that stuff has any nutrients left, anyway.”

“Sorry, Mom,” Whaley says, and takes the bags back out of the crisper and puts them on the counter. “Mom,” he says, “why did you want to leave Dad?”

“I don’t know,” she says, “it’s complicated. Your father and I used to fight a lot. You’ve asked me this so many times before, Whaley. I don’t know anymore now than I did before.”

“Did you love him?”

“I don’t know. I wanted to. At first I did.”

“When?” Whaley asks as he pulls out a tomato and a cucumber from his grocery bag.

“I don’t know, Whaley. Early. Before you were born.” His mother doesn’t look at him.

“Why before I was born? What changed after I was born?” He stops what he is doing and looks at her. “What happened?”

“Nothing happened, honey, I just started feeling differently toward him. It’s hard to explain.” She twists her hair between her fingers and looks at the floor.

He doesn’t really want to talk about it anymore, but he can’t stop. “Try. Please.”

“I don’t know. It didn’t happen right away. When you were a baby, I was really happy. I loved your father, and of course I adored you. I think we were really happy. But later, as you got older, I started to think maybe I had made a mistake. Maybe being a wife and a mother wasn’t what I really wanted. Your father couldn’t understand why I felt that way.” She touches his arm.

“I loved you, but I was just so scared.”

“Did my father love me?” Whaley asks. “Did he love me as much as you did?”

“I don’t know, Whaley. I think he did, but it was always so hard to tell with him. You know how he is.”

Whaley cuts a tomato, a cucumber, a pepper, and an onion, and eats them at the kitchen counter with a glass of milk. They taste like plastic, watery and bland and nothing like the vegetables he used to eat with his mother, but he forces them into his mouth and chews. His mother watches him while he eats, and rolls her eyes.

“I remember when we had real food around here,” she says, and Whaley nods.

“I think we should start planting while your father is gone,” she continues. “It’s the perfect time to do it, while the ground is still warm. It’ll be easy with both of us.”

“Sure,” Whaley says. “We can start tomorrow.”

The next day they dig and till until Whaley’s hands are blistered and his back is sore from bending over. His mother doesn’t get tired, but she tells him to rest whenever he needs it. They dig until it is dark, until Whaley can’t see what he is doing, and then they stop for the night.

“We got a great start on things,” she says as she follows him into the house.

After Whaley has showered, they sit on the couch together watching television until Whaley falls asleep. When he wakes up, his mother is leaning over him.

“Whaley,” she says, “there’s someone at the door.”

Whaley hears the knocking, and looks at the clock. It is 1:30 in the morning.

“Are you Richard Tate’s son?” the police officer asks when Whaley opens the door. Whaley looks at his mother before he answers. “Yes.”

“There’s been an accident. I’m sorry, but your father was involved.” The police officer looks like he isn’t sure what he should say.

“Is he okay?” Whaley asks, and the officer shakes his head.

“He hit another car head-on,” he says, “I’m so sorry to have to tell you this.” The officer puts his hand on Whaley’s shoulder and squeezes. “Is there anyone you’d like me to call? We’ve contacted your aunt and uncle, and they’ll be here in a few hours. In the meantime, you can come to the police station with me and wait for them.”

Whaley shakes his head. “I want to stay here,” he says. He looks at his mother, and she nods. He can’t tell what she’s thinking.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” the police officer says, frowning at him.

“You’re too young to be left alone right now.”

“I’m not--” Whaley starts to speak, but his mother puts her finger to her lips. “I’d really rather just wait for my aunt and uncle here,” he says. “They should be here pretty soon. I want to be here when they get here.”

“Well, I don’t think it’s a good idea. You better come to the station with me.”

Whaley puts on a pair of jeans and a t shirt, and slips on his sneakers. His mother brushes her hair and follows him into the car.

“He must have been on his way home,” she says, “he must have left early.”

Whaley nods.

“Maybe he was coming back to get you.”

“Probably.”

“It’s a terrible thing,” she says.

THE WOLF

An ugly young girl dressed all in red carries a large basket in one hand and a bundle of sticks in the other. She is walking from town back to her grandmother's house. She wears a thick knitted wool shawl, and a hood so no one can see her face. Her grandmother is sick, she has not been able to get out of bed in weeks, and the girl is bringing her food from the market—a loaf of dark, heavy bread, carrots, potatoes, and a bit of meat for soup, and last, a small lavender box of almond cookies—the old woman's favorite. The girl caresses the sticks, loves the roughness between her fingers. She has always collected sticks. They're all so different, she says, like snowflakes or fingerprints. Or people, she sometimes thinks, but she never says it. She wraps the sticks in colored yarn and carries them with her wherever she goes. She gives them to people she likes, but there aren't many of those. People often disappoint her. If she gives you a bundle of sticks and you don't keep them forever, if you don't seem proud of them, she will grow to hate you and demand the sticks back. If you see her after this, she will avoid you, will look the other way or even glare at you, scrunching up her nose and narrowing her eyes.

She is on her way to her grandmother's house, her own home now, she thinks, as she has lived there for nearly a year, and it is just a little farther—just a short way through this patch of woods, past the hunter's cabin. He is out front chopping wood, and he smiles at her, raises his hand. It is not a forest that she is passing through—it is too small and too bare—though she calls it that. She is a romantic, a child who grew up reading fairytales and stories about magic. Things her mother told her could never happen, but she has always believed they could. She has never seen anything magical, but she waits patiently. She still believes that if you want something enough, you'll get it.

As soon as she gets to the house, she knows something is wrong. It smells like dog, and she knows no dog lives there. The old woman is lying in bed, panting, her tongue dripping thick pink foam onto the pillow. She has never seen anyone pant like that. The girl isn't stupid. Naïve, maybe, and young, barely fifteen, but she notices things. Like the fur on her grandmother's face, the fact that instead of a nose, she has a whiskered snout. She notices the teeth that gleam from her grandmother's open mouth, strong and white and sharp. The fur around her mouth is tinged with red. The girl thinks she should keep her distance. She puts the basket on the table and opens it, takes out the vegetables and meat, the bread, the cookies. Another strange thing: her grandmother doesn't speak. She hasn't even said hello. She just lies there panting, her long meaty tongue lolling against the pillow. This is unusual. The girl's grandmother has always greeted her with kisses on the cheek and kind words. The girl knows it cannot be her grandmother in the bed. The thought is too strange to even imagine. She breathes in the smell of dog and watches the animal in her grandmother's bed lie there, bloated and panting like it has just run for miles.

It watches her too, yellow-eyed and open mouthed, then shifts, raises itself up so that it is resting on its haunches and sniffs the air, pointing its nose at her, breathing deeply. Its entire body is covered in dark gray fur, and its paws and chest are matted with blood. A torn and bloodstained cloth rests between its paws, and the girl recognizes it as her grandmother's nightgown. The wolf sits there, looking at her, and she begins to move toward it. She can smell its breath, the blood on its body and something like sweat.

You will think I'm cruel, but I knew as soon as she was born. She came out and I watched her twisted mouth as she cried and knew there was nothing we could do with her. Her upper lip was thick and red and malformed, like someone had slashed it with a razor and stitched it back together without making sure it came together the right way. She looked like an animal baring its teeth. Her lower lip was normal, but the upper one didn't allow her to close her mouth completely. When I saw her, all I could do was cry. The doctor told us she should be able to lead a perfectly normal life, that surgery wasn't out of the question, but I knew it wouldn't be that simple. Even with a normal mouth, she would still be horrid-looking—those thick eyebrows that met in the middle of her forehead, her nose as long and narrow and pointed sharp as a bird's beak, those strange eyes, so pale they were almost white. Her father didn't even want to hold her, but I made him do it. He sat with her on his lap and frowned, tried not to look at her. We wouldn't let anyone snap a photograph. We held her, and she looked up at us like she knew we were making a decision, but she didn't try to sway us.

We brought her home from the hospital four days later, our healthy, hideous baby daughter dressed in pink with a pink stuffed bear and a pink blanket we kept tucked under her nose, and two days later, her father left. He wrote a note, but I threw it in the fireplace without reading it, then burned the clothes and other things he hadn't taken with him. He was a coward. You will think I'm cruel, but at least I didn't run away in the middle of the night. It was cruel, yes, what I did, but there wasn't any other way.

She is standing next to the bed near the animal that could never be her grandmother. It looks her right in the face, its eyes fixed on hers. She slowly puts out her

hand, holds it, trembling, inches from the wolf's mouth. The wolf leans its head down and smells it, then looks back up at her. She keeps her hand out, not moving, and it licks it, its tongue soft and warm and wet. The girl sniffs her hand after the wolf finishes with it, and it smells strong and salty. She holds her hand to her nose and inhales deeply, then touches her tongue to where the animal's was just a minute before.

We named her Sarah, Hebrew for "princess" and her grandmother's name. Yes, I found it ironic. Bitterly so. The older she got, the more I thought about the operation. Maybe it would help her. Maybe it was my job as her mother to do whatever I could to give her as normal a life as possible. But I couldn't help thinking that it wouldn't change anything. She could eat and talk, and she wasn't in any pain, and no matter what miracles the doctor was able to perform, she would never be a pretty girl. She would probably never even look normal, never mind attractive. You think I'm wrong for not even trying. It's a wonder what a good doctor can do with a scalpel these days, a skin graft or two. But I couldn't bear the idea of her going through so much pain for nothing. They couldn't give her a new face. When she was younger, it didn't seem to bother her. She played outside by herself, collecting her sticks and rocks and all the other things she liked. She never asked me why her face wasn't like mine.

As she got older, though, she began to pay more attention to the people around her. She looked at their mouths especially, watched them as they talked and ate and smoked, and then she would put a hand to her own lips as if trying to understand what made them so different. I noticed her looking in the mirror one night, trying to push her lips into a normal position, to mold them into something that looked like everyone else's.

It was like she was trying to shape clay. She stopped when she saw me watching her, but I caught her doing it many times after that. She stared at her reflection all the time, and then she would look at me and then at the pictures of little girls and boys in her books. She knew she didn't look like any of them, but she never asked me why. She never confided in me. That's how she was—never really like a child at all, never dependent on me to tell her things. I probably should have tried to teach her more, should have sat her down when she was very young and been direct with her before she could start making up the lies she told herself. I should have talked to her the way a mother talks to a daughter. But she wanted to figure it out on her own, so I let her try. When she couldn't, she started wearing her hood all the time. She only took it off when I made her, when it started to smell or became so threadbare and dingy that it was time to replace it. And when I gave her another one, I had to make sure it was exactly like the one before it—always bright red, tied right under the chin so you couldn't see her face.

Her body began to look more like a woman's than a little girl's, though she was still so young. She was as tall as I am by the time she was nine and had breasts before her twelfth birthday—real breasts, not just bumps like the other little girls. Breasts that made me buy her a bra and throw away all of the little girl's dresses she had always worn. She took me by surprise every time I looked at her. She was slender and white, the skin on her hands translucent. With her back turned, she could have been a marble statue, a nymph or a goddess. Men would stop and stare at us when we walked through town. Sometimes they said things like “hey pretty” or “beautiful” at her. Of course they could only see her body and the hood hiding her face, and so they didn't realize how ridiculous it was to call a girl like her beautiful. When they talked to her, I would take her hand and lead her

away. Sometimes I walked so fast she had to run to keep up. She never said anything about the men, or my reaction to them, and I convinced myself she wasn't bothered.

One night, though, when I got up to go to the bathroom, I heard her talking to herself in her room. Her bedroom was at the end of the hall, so I tiptoed down from the bathroom until I was standing in front of her door. I could hear everything she said.

"Hi pretty," she said in a voice deeper than the way she usually spoke, "you sure are beautiful."

And then, "thank you" in her normal voice, only teasing, flirtatious—a tone I'd never heard her use.

"Can I take you out to a movie, or maybe some ice cream?"

"Sure."

And then she made mouth noises, wet, sucking sounds like she was kissing her hand. I heard her murmur "you're so pretty" again, and then I left, walking back down the hall to my own room as quickly as I could. I didn't bother to tiptoe.

She couldn't grow up to expect a man to fall in love with her and carry her away. It couldn't happen that way, not with her face. I sat down at the table with her one morning while she ate her breakfast, and told her as much. "Men just care so much more about looks than we do," I said. "If you were a man, it might be different. Women aren't so superficial." She looked at me and nodded, but I could tell she didn't think anything of what I'd said. I found her diary one afternoon. She wrote about the men in town, about how one day when I let her go there by herself she would talk to them, would ask one of them to take her for a ride in his car. "They like me," she wrote, and next to it she put a little smiley face.

“You are not beautiful,” I finally told her, holding her chin in my hand and staring straight at her. “You’re a sweet girl, a smart girl. Maybe someday a man will love you for that. But never for your looks. You need to accept it.” When I told her this, she yanked her head out of my grasp with a hiss. I put my hand on her shoulder, but she shook it off and ran to her room.

It happened like I knew it would. We were walking one day, past the grimy windows of the café on Main Street. I could see the men inside hunched over their coffee and egg sandwiches, watching us as we walked. Watching her. A few of them got up and came to the window, pressed their red faces against the glass and grinned. “Hey,” they said, their lips sloppy and wet. “Hey sweetheart.”

You will think I’m cruel, and I am. It would be ridiculous to argue. But it couldn’t go on. I simply wanted her to face what she was. “Look up,” I told her, as the men made kissy faces at her, as they preened and showed off, “look at them.” She turned to me, confused, and I said it again. “Look at them.” And when she shook her head, when she ducked down and tried to keep walking, I stopped her, held her shoulders and turned her to face the window. “You look at them.” I pulled the hood back from her face and stared at the men. “Look,” I said. And they did. They stopped slicking their greasy hair back with cheap plastic combs and puffing out their chests, stopped grinning and licking their lips, and I could hear the word “sweetheart” as they exhaled it, half-said. “What the hell is that?” I heard one of the men say as they stumbled back away from the window. “What’s wrong with her face?” Sarah pulled away from me and ran, her hood and her long dark hair blowing behind her. After that, she refused to leave the house. She didn’t even want to go outside for fear of someone seeing her. “You’ll have to go out

eventually,” I told her, but she shook her head. “No.” She stayed in her room for weeks, only coming out when I forced her to.

My mother, Sarah’s namesake, lived even farther away from town than we did, almost a full day’s walk, in a tiny log house in the woods. She tended a garden, only went to the market three or four times a year, went weeks without speaking to a soul. She was content with this, said she had no use for people anymore. I had tried to get her to move in with us when my husband and I got married, but she wouldn’t sacrifice her solitude. She loved her granddaughter, though, and when I told her about the troubles we were having, she invited Sarah to come and stay with her for a while. “As long as she likes,” she said, and said she was certain it would be no trouble at all. I asked Sarah if she would like this, if maybe she would be happy living with her grandmother so far away from everything, and she nodded and began packing her things. “It’s probably best this way,” I told her. “You’ll be happier there.”

She sits on the floor, and the wolf sits beside her, puts its head in her lap. She strokes its thick fur, and it nuzzles against her thighs. They stay this way until long past dark, and then she hears someone outside the house, leaves crackling under heavy boots. The wolf raises its head and looks at her, and she presses her face to its neck, then whispers “go,” pushes it gently away. It trots toward the back of the house, and the girl hears the back door creaking as it pushes its way through. It lets out a low howl as it runs through the woods.

When the hunter enters the house, she is sitting next to her grandmother’s bed, holding a torn and bloodstained nightgown in her hands, staring at it. She looks up at him

when she hears his footsteps, and the hunter sees that her mouth is deformed, her upper lip twisted and grotesque. Her teeth are clearly visible, and they are beautiful, long and white and shiny. The hunter looks at her, at her horrible face and her long dark hair and heavy breasts, her thin moon-white body. She stares back at him.

“My grandmother,” she says, holding out the nightgown. “A wolf killed her.”

We had a funeral for Sarah’s grandmother, a small service that no one but the two of us, the priest, and the hunter attended. I saw the hunter watching Sarah the entire time, but whenever he saw me looking at him he blushed and put his head down. Sometimes he even pretended to pray. After the funeral, Sarah went back to wandering outside. I told her not to go too far, to stay away from the woods, but she just laughed. “Nothing will hurt me,” she said. She stayed gone for hours, often from dawn until dusk, and sometimes I was sure she wouldn’t come back at all until I heard her footsteps on the walk. Sometimes when she came back she wasn’t wearing her hood, and her hair was loose and tangled down her back, a rat’s nest. Sometimes her dresses were torn and dirty. “What do you do out there?” I asked her as I brushed out the tangles and sewed the dresses, but she only shook her head. I wanted to follow her one time, to see where she went, but I never did. She seemed happy, mysterious, like a girl in love. I waited for her to tell me, to bring the hunter home with her one day and tell me she’d gotten what she wanted.

The hunter is tracking a deer when he hears a wolf’s howl coming from the house where the old woman died. He wonders if the girl is there again, if she has come back to collect her things, and he raises his rifle. There are tracks leading to the door of the house,

but none going back in the other direction. He looks in the window. The girl is on the bed, her dark hair loose and spilling over the pillows. She is wearing a torn red dress, and the hunter can see her naked white body underneath. She is on her back. A large gray wolf hunches over her, its mouth at her throat. The girl's mouth is open, and her eyes are shut tight. Her arms are around the wolf's neck, and it looks like she is embracing it, but the hunter thinks she must be trying to push it away from her and is just too weak. She is young and thin, and the wolf is clearly more powerful. The hunter watches the struggle for just a moment, sees the wolf bury its face in the girl's neck, and then he shoots the wolf. It falls onto the floor.

When he enters the house, the girl is huddled next to the wolf. She strokes its head and back and presses her face into its side. She is crying, screaming, and the hunter thinks she must be in shock.

"Are you okay?" he asks her. "It didn't bite you, did it?"

"Go away," she says, her twisted mouth sneering and her teeth flashing in the dim light, "just get out of here. Can't you see what you've done?"

The hunter doesn't know what to say, and so he stands and watches her as she pets the wolf. It is barely alive, and it licks her hands. She presses its head into her chest. When it finally shudders and dies, the girl looks up at the hunter. "You'll bury it," she says, and the hunter nods stupidly. "And when you're done, you'll take me to my mother." The girl is shivering. The house is cold, and her dress hangs on her body in shreds. The wolf must have torn it trying to get at her flesh. The hunter takes off his heavy wool jacket and gives it to the girl, and she wraps it around her shoulders without looking at him. "Bury it," she says, her voice a soft growl.

The second time he brought her back to the house, I cried. It was like I had imagined it would be. He had his arm around her, supporting her as they walked through the yard, and she was wearing his coat buttoned up to her chin. He wasn't a handsome man, but they made a strange picture walking together. He looked so wholesome, so lovely and bland next to her, with his wheat-blond hair and full cheeks and bright red lips. Next to him, without her hood, she could have been a charity case, a deformed orphan too ugly and sullen to even be pitied. I tried not to think this way as I looked at them. "Your daughter is very brave," the hunter said as he sat down with the mug of coffee I handed him.

"Her name is Sarah," I said. "She's a good girl."

"Yes," he said.

He is a kind man, and he takes care of my daughter and their children, but the hunter is not smart. He has been in the woods too long. When he came to ask me if he could marry Sarah, only months after he saved her from the wolf, I don't think he said more than twenty words. He stuttered and blushed and barely looked at me.

"What do you want?" I finally asked him, putting my hand firmly on his arm. I thought he might cry.

"I have money," he said finally, "and a house. I can take care of her."

I stared at him for a long time, until he met my eyes. "Will you allow it?" he asked, twisting his hat between his thick fingers.

"Do you love her?" I asked him. I smiled at him, encouraging.

"I want to take care of her," he said.

When I asked Sarah if she wanted to marry him, she didn't say yes, but she didn't say no either. She just shrugged and went back to the sticks she was tying up with twine.

"Do you think he loves you?" I asked her. "Has he told you?" She shook her head. "He must," I said, "or maybe he will learn to."

The hunter is gone for days at a time, but when he comes back he brings freshly killed deer and rabbits and sometimes turkeys. Sarah makes dinners and soups out of some of the meat, and freezes enough to last the family through the times when game is scarce. She sends her son and daughter to their grandmother's house every week with the rest, tucks them into their jackets and hoods and tells them to be careful in the woods, to come back as quick as they can. She knows she should be happy. Her husband touches her, lies beside her and strokes her neck and hair and legs. He has never kissed her mouth, but sometimes when he is happy he'll kiss her hand or the top of her head. He never says much, but neither does Sarah. The children are loud and cheerful, and the house is never quiet.

At night, Sarah and her husband sleep back to back, and in the morning when she wakes up, he is already gone. She tells herself that he is a good man, that he loves her, and she is content. It is enough. She thinks about this when he touches her, when he buries his face in her neck and her chest, the nights he climbs on top of her and settles between her legs, and later when he falls asleep, his face in her hair. Sarah does not love him, but she loves his hard weight on her, his body's heat, the scent of sweat and the forest in his coarse dark hair. She thinks of the animals he brings home, their blood on his hands and arms and mouth. She loves his body, so much stronger than hers, as it holds

her to the rough mattress, and the sound and smell of his breath as he pants, breathless against her. She pleasures in her husband—half-awake as she lies next to him, gazing into such big yellow eyes, such sharp white teeth.

THE HOLE

The hole opened up more than a month ago, almost two months now, the day it poured rain from 8 in the morning until Dan came home from work in the evening. May was walking their dog Harvey after dinner when she saw it, just a small hole at the dead end in front of the empty lot the kids always use as a softball field. She thought the rain must have caused it, only it didn't look like a sinkhole or a depression, but rather the aftereffect of an explosion. Like someone had been blasting underground. Pieces of roots and small rocks littered the ground around the opening, like they had been thrown upward. May approached the hole, stepping lightly, but the ground was solid. She got to the edge of the hole and looked down, but she couldn't see anything. The dog pawed at the ground around the hole and whined, and May pulled the leash until he turned away. When she got home she told Dan about it, and he said it wasn't anything to worry about. "I'm sure the Kaplans will call somebody about it, since it's on the edge of their property," he said. "You know how they are."

The problem is, it's getting bigger. The night May first saw it, it was small, only slightly larger in diameter than a large serving bowl. It is now as big around as their dining table. No one but May seems concerned. May and Dan's two sons can't get enough of it. They chase each other around it, throw rocks and sticks down it and cock their heads to see if they can hear them hit the bottom, shine flashlights into it and swear they see eyes staring back at them. They run back to the house laughing and tell May there's a monster there, they've seen it, it must eat the things they throw down for it and they think it's growing. May has told them a million times that she hates them playing there, but the boys don't listen. "Come on, Mom, it's fine," they tell her, and Sean, their

oldest, rolls his eyes. “It’s just a hole. We know there’s not really a monster there,” he says. Barry agrees with whatever his older brother says, so he nods at May. “It’s fine, Mom,” he says. Dan tells them to be careful, to not make their mother worry, and the boys nod. “It’s really fine,” they say, and Dan looks at May and shrugs. May thought they would get their fill of it and move on to something else like they’ve always done with toys and games and everything else they’ve ever played with, but so far they haven’t gotten tired of it. Every afternoon since the thing opened up, they’ve ridden their bikes to it and played until dinnertime. May asks them why they like it so much, and they just shrug. “There’s nothing else to do,” they say.

People from the city office have come about the hole, but they haven’t done anything but take measurements and put up yellow Caution tape. When May saw the men measuring the hole, she asked what they planned on doing about it, but they said they didn’t know yet. “It’s hard to say,” they said, “we have to wait to see how big it’s going to get.” May asked what caused it, but the men said they didn’t know that, either. “Could be anything—underground spring, fault line, maybe. As long as it’s not a leaky gas line, it should be okay. There’s a guy coming to run some tests in the next week or so.” So far, no one has come to run any tests. May goes to the window whenever she hears a truck go by, but none stop at the end of the street. She’s worried they have forgotten, or that maybe the men just told her someone was coming to placate her.

On Saturday, May has to call Sean and Barry three times to get them to come in for lunch, and when they finally do, they’re covered in dark black mud. Barry’s face and shirt are streaked with it, and May wonders if he’s been eating it, though she has been trying to break him of the habit. The grilled cheese sandwiches and soup are ready on the

stove, but May takes the boys into the bathroom and scrubs their faces and hands and makes them change clothes before they can eat. “Hurry up and eat,” May tells them, when they’re clean enough to sit down at the table, “everything was ready half an hour ago—I don’t know why you boys can’t go outside without getting filthy. And what were you doing out there? I was on the porch yelling for you for twenty minutes.” The boys are sullen, and when they’ve finished their sandwiches they ask to go back outside. “Stay away from that hole,” May says, and they just nod and run out the door. She watches them get on their bikes and pedal down the street, away from the dead end.

May puts things away in the kitchen and makes a cold cheese sandwich for herself. When Sean and Barry were little, she loved them like she never thought she could love anything. She felt like a bear with her cubs, protecting them from all the threats of the world. Now that they are older she doesn’t think she can protect them anymore. Sean will be thirteen in two years, but he already acts like a teenager. There are days he barely talks to her, days she can tell he wishes she would just leave him alone. Barry hasn’t curled up in her lap for story time in almost a year. She wonders if Dan would have been happy if they hadn’t had children, if they had just had the dog instead and stayed in their two bedroom apartment downtown instead of moving into the house on the outskirts of the city. He had never said anything about wanting kids, and she’d assumed he didn’t want them either. But when they found out she was pregnant with Sean, he cried and said he couldn’t wait to be a father. A year later, when she was pregnant with Barry, Dan insisted they name him after his father, who died when Dan was eighteen. He calls his sons his little men, buys them the kinds of candy he liked when he was a kid and takes them to baseball and football games every season. He tells May he

knows she loves Sean and Barry, but she can't possibly understand the bond between a father and his sons. May does love the boys, but she thinks this must be true. She wonders what Dan would do if anything happened to them.

The next-door neighbor's dog has gone missing, and May has seen signs posted through the neighborhood advertising two lost cats. She has never let Harvey out by himself, but now she watches him any time someone opens the front door. She is sure he'll get outside and she'll never see him again. She tells Dan this one night while they're reading in bed, and he says she's crazy. "Harvey doesn't even want to move when he's in the house," he says, putting his book down on his chest to look at her. "He's too tired to try to escape."

"Where do you think Alex and Monica's dog went?" May asks him.

"Who the hell knows? Probably as far away from Monica as he could run," Dan says, and goes back to his book.

When Dan is asleep, May gets up and looks out the window. The empty lot is only three houses down, and she can see it if she cranes her head. The hole is the size of a small swimming pool now, and May has forbidden Sean and Barry to go near it. She watches them as they ride their bikes and skateboards after school, and yells at them if they get too close to that end of the street. She knows Monica and Alex's dog must have fallen down it one night while he was out running loose, and that's probably what happened to the neighborhood cats, too. One wrong step and one of the boys could lose his footing and have the same thing happen to him. He could break a leg, or worse. May called the people at the city office a few days ago and left a message telling them they

needed to take care of the hole, someone was bound to get hurt, but she hasn't heard back from them.

The next evening, Sean and Barry have their first sleepover, a birthday party at their friend A.J.'s house. A.J. lives three blocks over from May and Dan, and May walks the boys over to his house even though they tell her she doesn't need to. When they get there, May tells them to be good, and to call her when they need to be picked up the next day. They tell her A.J.'s mother will probably bring them home on her way to church, and they hug her goodbye and then take their backpacks and the plastic shopping bag of A.J.'s presents into the house. Sandra, A.J.'s mother, waves at May from the doorway, and May waves back. She walks back to the house, but when she gets to her street, she follows it to the end instead of stopping. It is getting dark, but May can still see the hole clearly. Dirt is piled up at its edges, and it looks like kids have been stomping on it to flatten it out. It is covered with sneaker prints. There are candy wrappers and soda cans all around the hole as well, and May looks at them closely to see if they look like anything Sean and Barry eat. She picks up a Zagnut wrapper and puts it in her pocket; she will ask them about it when they come home tomorrow. She kneels on the ground and leans her right ear toward the hole, but she can't hear anything.

When May gets home, Dan has made eggs and hash browns for dinner, and is eating in his recliner in front of the television. "There's plenty left for you," he says when he hears her come in. "No thanks," May says, and microwaves some leftover spaghetti from dinner from the night before. After she's eaten, May washes the dishes, spraying down the pan Dan used for the eggs and watching rubbery flakes of yolk go down the drain. When she's finished, she runs a bath and soaks until the water is almost cold. The

house is quieter than it has been in a long time, now that the boys aren't there. Dan is asleep in his chair when she gets out, so May turns down the television and lies down on the couch to read.

She wakes up to the sound of someone knocking on the door. It's Sandra. May knows before she even turns on the porch light and looks out the window. It has to be the boys—they're lost, or hurt. Like Monica's dog, or that little girl who tripped on a piece of root near the hole and broke her ankle. She didn't fall in, but just a few more feet and she would have. Sandra sent all of the kids outside to run off the sugar from the cake and ice cream, and now the boys are gone. There's no other reason Sandra would be coming to the house this late. May smooths her hair and rubs her eyes, tries to wake up. The boys must be gone. She doesn't know what else could have happened. "Open the damn door, May," Dan says behind her, and May opens the door. Sean and Barry are standing next to Sandra, and May can tell Barry has been crying. Dan laughs when he sees them. "You guys get homesick?" he asks them, and when they nod, he leads them inside, smiling at Sandra. "Maybe some ice cream or a sandwich or something will make you feel better."

"Sorry to barge in on you like this," Sandra says, "but the boys felt so lousy they couldn't even sleep. They said they wouldn't be able to unless they had their own beds, so I thought I better bring them home." She smiles at May. "Nice to be needed, huh?"

"Yes," May says, and forces herself to smile back at Sandra. "Thanks." Sandra turns to go, but May puts a hand on her arm and stops her. "I thought they were gone," May says. "I was sure of it."

"Gone?" Sandra asks. She looks confused.

“I thought something had happened,” May corrects herself, and smiles again, embarrassed. “It was their first time away. I was worried they’d throw a temper tantrum or get sick or something.”

“They were angels,” Sandra says. “We’ll have to try another sleepover again soon. A.J.’s so disappointed they had to leave.”

“I’m sure next time will be better,” May says.

After Dan has put the boys to bed, May tells him she is taking Harvey for a walk. “Can’t you leave the dog alone?” he asks her. “He doesn’t like walks anymore.”

“It’s good for him,” May says as she and Harvey go outside.

They walk to the end of the street, to the hole, and May lets Harvey off of his leash. It has been so long since she’s done it that Harvey doesn’t seem to know what to do. He just looks at her and whines a little, then sits in the dirt a few feet away from her. May stands at the edge of the hole and looks down, tells herself to relax. It has grown so much, and there’s still so much time. It is getting bigger every day.

THE MEEK

Veronica puts laundry away. There are dishes to dry, and the floor hasn't been swept in weeks, and with spring having come everything is covered in a thick layer of dark yellow pollen. The baby has been sneezing, and Johnny says he can feel it in his throat when he's trying to sleep. He coughs and hacks, spits dramatically into the bathroom sink every morning. "I'll take care of it," Veronica says, but instead of vacuuming or dusting she sits on the couch and listens to the birds. They've made a nest in the air conditioning unit that is built into the living room wall, directly under where the ceiling begins, and she can hear the babies chirping for food all day. She and the cat sit and listen, and the cat makes chittering sounds. His mouth opens and closes rapidly. He paces back and forth on the floor in front of the window. Veronica can't stop thinking about the birds even when she's away from the air conditioning unit. She wonders how many are in there and what would happen if she turned the unit on. She doesn't think they would die, but she isn't sure. There are flies buzzing around in the house. Veronica swats them with a red swatter until they're a pulpy mess, then scrapes them up with paper towels and throws them in the trash. There must be a hole in one of the screens, because she's killed at least ten today.

After she has folded the clothes and put them in the correct dressers and closets, she sits and listens for a while. The birds are quiet today, but every once in a while she can hear them moving around. They make a soft thumping noise, a squeak. Veronica doesn't know what kind of birds they are, but they must be small to have nested in the air conditioner. She can't imagine it affords them much space. She doesn't think birds need a lot of space, but it can't very comfortable to be wedged in between an air conditioner and

a wall. Birds aren't known for being very bright, she thinks. The cat has fallen asleep on the chair next to the window. He snores softly.

When it is time to make dinner, Veronica puts steaks in a pan and jabs three potatoes with a fork and puts them in the oven. Johnny has been after her to make steaks for days now, ever since she bought the Value Pak at the grocery store. He won't let her freeze them, says they taste like metal after, and so she decides she'll make two today and two again on Friday. Veronica would rather have chicken, or even fish, but Johnny says he doesn't like dealing with all the bones. While the steaks are cooking, she goes into the baby's room to check on him. He's sleeping with two of his fingers in his mouth. She carefully pulls them out of his mouth and places his arm across his chest. Then she tugs the blanket up to his chin. He doesn't move except to purse his lips and stretch his legs in his sleep. In the living room, the cat is alert again, sitting on the back of the couch watching the air conditioning unit. The birds are moving around and chattering faintly. Veronica wonders if it is feeding time.

The steaks are burned, and Johnny sighs as he eats. He rolls his eyes at her when he doesn't think she's looking and dumps A-1 all over his plate. Veronica tries to ignore him. She chews her own steak and potato and looks out the window to the neighbor's carport. The neighbor isn't home. Johnny finishes his food and goes into the bathroom to take a shower, and when Veronica gets up she leaves the dirty dishes on the table. The birds are making a racket, and the cat meows plaintively at the window and starts every time a sound comes from the air conditioner.

When the baby begins to cry, Veronica goes into the nursery and picks him up. His diaper is wet, and she changes it without turning on the light. He snuffles and

clenches his fists, strikes her tiredly on the chest. “Sweet boy,” Veronica says, “sweet boy,” and dances the baby around the room. She holds him in front of her and bounces back and forth, shakes her hips and sways. He quiets as she dances him out of the nursery and down the hall, past the bathroom where Johnny is listening to the ball game on the radio as he showers. The cat watches as she dances the baby out the front door and past the window in the living room. She stops in front of the air conditioning unit. The birds are quiet now, and Veronica can feel them watching her. She holds the baby up, stretching her arms as high as she can. His pink fists grasp at the bits of cloth and sticks that hang out of the air conditioner, but he can’t reach them. He lets out a shriek and startles the birds. They fly out of the air conditioner, tiny brown finches with white bellies and black eyes. They are plain and lovely, and Veronica watches them as they flutter around her head and the baby’s. She feels their wings, the air stirred and dusty against her face. She thinks she can smell them, and they smell brown and oily, like dirt. They are all around her, and she can almost feel them graze her scalp, taking strands of her hair with them as they fly.

FLOAT

Christopher goes into his son's room and looks at the fish as it swims in its tank. It is getting bigger. Not in a normal way. It is growing, but much more quickly than a normal fish grows. Every day, it seems, it is bigger. He notices it.

They bought the fish on a whim. The cat had run away and the boy cried for hours until they told him they would take him out and buy him a new pet. He said he wanted something that couldn't run away, something with no free will. The boy says things like this sometimes—things that make Christopher and his wife worry about him. The boy wanted a turtle, but when the man at the pet store mentioned keeping the lid on the tank, that an escape was possible, they looked at the boy and shook their heads, and he nodded back at them silently.

The fish is bright red with fins that puff up whenever it feels threatened. It drifts back and forth across the bottom of the tank, picking up bits of gravel and spitting them back out again. They have shown the boy how to pinch two or three tiny pellets of food between his fingers and drop them into the tank, have lectured him about overfeeding it. They've told him the story about how a house sitter once killed their fish by overfeeding them. The fish were floating at the top of the tank, bloated and pale, they said. The boy promised he would never feed the fish too much. They watch him sometimes when he doesn't know it and notice how careful he is, how precise, counting out pellets and dropping them one by one onto the surface of the water.

Soon they are buying a larger tank. The fish is the size of the boy's fist, round and buoyant, and it bobs happily around the tank like a bathtub toy. Christopher watches it every night and wonders how big it will get—if it will keep expanding and expanding

until they are forced to put it in the swimming pool and then set it free in the ocean. He wonders, if it keeps growing, if it will one day try to move onto land. He reads that fish will grow to fit the size of their container, and decides not to buy another tank, no matter how much it needs one.

The boy turns over in his sleep, opens his eyes half way and groans. Go back to sleep, Christopher says, I'm just checking in. The boy says he's been dreaming about the world being covered with ice. There were no fish or anything, he says. Nothing could swim because of all the ice. Christopher smiles, says the word *glaciers*. A long time ago there was nothing but ice, he says. He wants to tell his son all about the world when it was under layers of thick blue ice, when things still swam, but you couldn't see them they were so far down underneath.

EVOLUTION

There are seven of us—Mrs. Carlton and her aide in the kindergarten, and then one of us for each grade from the first to the fifth. We each have twenty-five to thirty students depending on the year, on how many students have to be held back or transfer over the summer. I teach the fourth graders, the largest class in the school, and I have the most responsibility. I have thirty students this year, and have been told that I will probably have between five and ten more in the fall. When he told me this, just a couple of weeks ago at the beginning of May, the principal said he wasn't worried because he knew I could handle it. "We're all very impressed with you, Ms. Stafford," he said and smiled, and I thanked him. I'm a good teacher. It is what I've wanted to do all my life.

Every day I lead the students into the classroom from the hallway, where they stand around after breakfast next to the water fountains and lockers chewing gum and yelling at each other. Not all of them are supposed to have free breakfast at school—their parents can afford for them not to—but we let them have it anyway. Their parents drop them off at school early, and it's either breakfast or they wander around the halls or sit in the classroom without supervision. The principal has called meetings about it, but he says he understands there's nothing we can do. I make the children line up outside the door and walk single file to their desks. They jostle and hit one another, and when they get too loud I make them turn around, go back into the hall, and do it all over again. By the third or fourth time, they are quiet and sullen, and I let them sit down.

Most of them are smart children, smarter than a lot of the students in the private schools. They're high spirited, perhaps some of them are a bit too hyper, but they listen, and they understand what they're told. When I first started teaching, I didn't believe it. I

thought they ignored everything I said, but after a while I realized they were taking it all in. It didn't change the way I taught, but it made me think. I spoke with the other teachers, and they said the same thing. "They surprise you," Ms. Foster, who has the third graders, said, and the rest of them agreed. They smiled at me, and a couple of them patted me on the shoulder. "They always surprise you," Ms. Foster said.

And they do. They surprise me. Sometimes they say such strange things. They ask me what it's like to pay bills, to live in a house by myself. I tell them I'm not by myself, I have a dog, but they say that's practically by myself. They ask me what I'd do if someone broke into the house while I'm asleep, and I tell them no one will break in, I live in a very safe place, but they just look at each other knowingly and shrug. They tell me they want to be married by the time they're my age—they want it to happen before they're old. They want to be rich and have kids of their own that they'll send to private school. Some say they want to work for the government, and others want to own their own businesses and pay other people to do all the grunt work. They say it just like that—"the grunt work"—and when I ask them where they've heard phrases like this, they say they don't remember. I tell them it's time to quiet down and finish their worksheets, and they say they're already finished. When I come around to check, they are.

We do math first because it's my least favorite, long division, and the students all raise their hands quickly so they can solve the problems on the board. They love using the dry erase markers, and I have to take them away from them when they've finished the problem so they won't doodle all over the board. "Don't waste the markers," I tell them, "they're expensive," but they just roll their eyes. After math, I let two of them—the ones who've done the best on the problems—erase the board, and then it's time for geography.

I show them a map of the United States, and they call out the names of the states: Alabama, Alaska, all the way through to Washington, West Virginia, and Wyoming, until we've filled in all the pink and green and yellow shapes. Next week we'll start the capitals, I tell them, months ahead of schedule, and they nod.

At lunch time I go with the students into the cafeteria and sit at a table with the other teachers and eat my lunch. I've grown accustomed to eating at 11:30, though it's at least an hour earlier than I used to. On the weekends, though, I start getting hungry by 11:00 and have to force myself to wait. The cafeteria is noisy and smells like mashed potatoes and greasy hamburgers, pizza cut into rectangles, sprinkled with bright red dots of pepperoni. Underneath the food smell is mop water and chemicals, bleach. At first it was all I could smell when I went in there, but now I don't notice it. Some of the teachers get the same hot lunch the students do, which seems so odd. The second grade teacher, whose name I always forget because she's new this year, Mrs. Fenton, and Mrs. Carlton always go through the line together. They say the cafeteria food isn't that bad, but most of us bring our lunches. We have salads in Tupperware containers, sandwiches on whole wheat bread, sometimes frozen meals that we have to heat in the microwave in the teacher's lounge before bringing them into the cafeteria.

The students come up to us at the table to ask questions—can they go to the restroom, the nurse's office—and they stare at our food like it surprises them. They point at my lentil salad and vegetable soup, organic black bean burritos, and ask “what's that,” and I have to tell them it's rude to point at someone else's food. “They're just curious,” Ms. Foster says, and I can see she disapproves of my reproaching the students, but I tell her they have to learn manners. She thinks I'm prudish and old-fashioned, I heard her

telling the other teachers so in the lounge when she didn't know I was there, but I don't see any reason to start a fight over it. Ms. Foster and I are the same age, but she likes to think of herself as rebellious, as someone who bucks the system. We both work for the public school, I want to tell her.

After lunch the students have a half hour to work on their art projects. They are making shadowboxes, and I walk around to all of them to look at their progress. Megan is gluing cotton balls onto the blue background of her shadowbox, and when I tell her she's making lovely clouds, she just smiles and goes back to what she's doing. "What do you say when someone gives you a compliment?" I ask her, but she doesn't say anything. "Class, can you tell Megan what we say when someone gives us a compliment?" I ask, putting my hand on Megan's shoulder, "she must have forgotten." They stop what they're doing and look at me, then at Megan, and I'm getting ready to ask them again when one of them speaks up. "Thank you," Ben says quietly, not looking at the rest of the students. "That's right, Ben," I say, smiling at him, and the others frown a bit. "Now Megan," I say, still holding Megan's shoulder, "I just told you you're making lovely clouds. What do you say?" And for a minute I think she's still not going to say anything. I take a deep breath. Of all of my students, Megan is by far the least intelligent. She tries, but I can't help but be concerned. She will probably have to be held back a year, and at the very least she'll be attending summer school. I have told her parents that she isn't making satisfactory progress, and have even offered to tutor her on my own time, but they tell me they'll hire someone to help her. Megan looks down at her shadowbox, and whispers something. "Did you say 'thank you,' Megan?" I ask her, leaning down so our heads are almost touching.

“Yes,” she whispers, still looking down.

“Good,” I say, straightening back up and turning to the rest of the class, “you’re very welcome.”

I don’t think of myself as pushy or overly strict, certainly not prudish, but I want my students to grow up knowing how to behave. Their parents don’t teach them manners anymore, and so they come into my classroom not understanding how to act with adults, or even with one another. When I get frustrated with them, I remind myself they’re children and have to be taught, and that it’s my responsibility to teach them. “It will never hurt you to have manners,” I tell them, “people always appreciate politeness.” When the half hour for art is up, I give out lollipops to the students who have been the most quiet and productive. I give one to Megan, and she says “thank you” loudly and clearly as she accepts it.

The fifth grade teacher is named Mr. Carson. David. He teaches in the classroom next door to mine, and is always asking me questions or borrowing things like the stapler or the three-hole puncher. We talk at recess and after school sometimes while we’re grading papers and quizzes. Some of the other teachers say he has a crush on me, but I tell them he’s just lonely. “We’re neighbors,” I say. “I’m someone to talk to.” David is fifteen years older than me, in his early fifties, and he used to be married. His wife left him and took their daughter with her, and now he never sees them. The other teachers gossip about him when he’s not around, but I try not to. He is attractive, but I can’t imagine dating him. He reeks of cigarette smoke, and sometimes sweat. He doesn’t always smell clean, and I worry about him. I wonder what it would be like if I came to his house one day and cleaned it for him, put out fresh linens and washed the windows,

cooked him a meal. He rarely eats at lunchtime, though sometimes he brings a limp sandwich on white bread or a bag of potato chips. Sometimes I'll see him sneaking a cigarette behind the dugout on the softball field while our students run laps and play kickball at recess. He'll duck his head and look ashamed, and I'll laugh. I tell him he should quit, that it's a horrible habit, but he says he needs at least one vice to get through the day. He is attractive in that pathetic way, a man you want to save from himself. I fantasize about saving him, but it would take more than I have to give. And what would I do once I saved him, I ask myself. I don't know.

Once when I was new and was having a bad day I smoked with him, crouching down so no one could see until I heard my students asking where I was. I stubbed out the cigarette with my foot and covered it with some dirt, then sprayed myself with perfume, even spraying a tiny bit onto my tongue. David smiled at me and took my hand, kissed it, and then held it until I pulled away from him. "You're blushing," he said. "It's sweet."

"Why did you kiss my hand?" I asked him, and he said he didn't know. He looked at me until I turned away from him and said I had to get back to my class. Ever since then, whenever we're outside together he pats his jacket pocket and grins at me, but I shake my head. I try to avoid him at recess, but he always manages to talk to me during the day.

I am talking to the students about primates when he comes to the classroom to ask me a question. "Our closest relatives in the animal kingdom are primates," I tell the children, as I tape a poster displaying pictures of orangutans, chimpanzees, and gorillas to the wall. The children laugh at the poster, at the silly expressions on the monkeys' faces.

“That little one looks like you,” Michael says to Ben, elbowing him, but when I narrow my eyes at him he gets quiet.

“I have a film about primates to show you,” I say, gesturing toward the television and DVD player that sit on a metal cart pushed against the wall, “but we’ll only watch it if you all are good.” The children sit up straight in their desks and fold their hands in front of them, suddenly model students. When I want them to behave, all I have to say is that we’ll watch a film, even if it only lasts ten minutes.

“What are some things that we know about primates?” I ask the class. “You read about them in your book last night.”

“They’re very smart,” Anton says without raising his hand. His nose is running, it has been for weeks now, and I hand him a tissue before he can wipe it on his sleeve.

“Yes,” I say. “What else?”

“They like to climb,” says Elizabeth.

Before anyone else can say anything, there’s a knock, and I can see David looking into the classroom through the small square of glass in the door. It is Michael’s turn to be the class monitor, and he jumps up to open the door. “Hi, Mr. Carson,” the students say loudly in sing-song as David comes into the room. He smiles and waves at them. “Don’t let me interrupt your work,” he says.

“We’re talking about monkeys,” Megan tells him, twisting in her seat and bouncing up and down. She acts differently when she sees David, more lively. All the students love him. I think this is why the principal hasn’t fired him yet.

David curls his arms and sticks his lower lip out, goes *ooo ooo ooo* and scratches his head, and the students all laugh.

“Can I help you with something?” I ask him.

“Do you all mind if I borrow your teacher for a minute or two?” David asks the class, smiling at them.

“We’re getting ready to watch a movie,” Ben says, sounding nervous. I haven’t shown the students a film in a few weeks, not since our unit on reptiles, and I can tell he’s afraid something might prevent me from doing so today.

“Maybe Ms. Stafford will turn the movie on before she comes out into the hall with me,” David tells him. “It will only take a minute.”

“All right,” I say, turning on the television and quickly lowering the volume as the static sound fills the room and the children clap their hands over their ears. “The film is called *Primates in the Wild*,” I tell them once I’ve adjusted the television and DVD player. “Do you remember what a habitat is?”

“It’s a place where something lives,” they shout, and I tell them to be sure to pay close attention to the film. They will write a report on what they’ve seen when it’s over. I dim the lights as I follow David into the hall.

“Listen,” he says once I’ve shut the door behind us, “I need your help.”

“What’s wrong?” I ask him. “Did you just leave your students by themselves in the classroom?”

“They’re at an assembly this afternoon, remember?” David says, “The DARE presentation. It lasts until the end of the day.” I nod.

“There’s something I want you to see,” he says, and opens the door to his classroom. The lights are off, and even with the sunlight coming through the blinds, it still seems dim.

“This place is like a bomb shelter,” I say as I follow David into the room. It’s dusty and smells faded, like he hasn’t bothered to clean in months.

Once we’re inside, he shuts the door behind us. He sits down at his desk and opens the left hand drawer, then pulls out a wrinkled piece of paper. He hands it to me. “I need you to tell me what I should do.” The paper is a letter from David’s ex-wife. I know it as soon as I start reading. Her handwriting is small and narrow, angular, like I imagine her face to be. She says things like “let the past be the past” and “water under the bridge,” and I know I wouldn’t like her if I ever met her. “She wants me to come to Colorado,” David says, leaning over my shoulder, “she thinks we could try to work things out.”

“I see that,” I say.

“Do you think I should go?” he asks, taking the letter from my hand and folding it over and over.

“Do you want to go?” I ask.

“I don’t know. I would get to see Anna. She’s eleven now. I miss her.”

“And your wife?” I ask, watching his hands.

“Rachel. I don’t miss her as much,” he says, and he laughs a bit. “I’m kind of tired of being alone, though,” he says, and even though I don’t look up, I can tell he’s looking at me.

“It must be hard to be away from Anna,” I say, “and even your wife.”

“It is,” he says. “You know, I’ve hoped something like this would happen for a long time. I used to imagine them coming back, Rachel saying she’d made a mistake, the whole bit. I thought about it all the time, even planned what I would say.”

“When would you leave?” I ask, looking up at him.

“After the end of the school year,” he says. “August, probably.” I nod.

“What do you think?” he asks.

“It might be a good thing for you to go,” I say. “Your wife can take care of you, make sure you eat enough.” David looks at me for a second, then he looks down at the letter again.

“She could,” he says.

“I’d be glad if you two were able to work things out,” I say. David puts his hand on my arm. His fingers are dry, a little rough.

“You really would?” he asks.

“Of course,” I say. I move toward the door, begin to turn the knob. “It sounds like it would be the best thing. I need to get back now.”

“I’ll go,” David says, and I turn to look at him from the doorway.

“You will?”

“Yeah. I’m going to call Rachel right now.” He takes out his cell phone and begins to dial the number, stops and looks down at the paper, then continues dialing. I close the door softly behind me as I leave the classroom. I get a drink of water from the fountain. In the hall outside my own classroom, I can hear the shrieks of the monkeys on the film and the sound of my students giggling and imitating the noises. I listen for a minute, and it becomes hard to tell the difference between the two.

It is dark in the room, and warm, even though everywhere else in the building is freezing now that the air conditioning has been turned on for the summer. The air is heavy and damp, and it smells of sweat, of thirty small bodies exhaling. The film will be over in five minutes or so, and I sit at my desk and watch my students as they watch it.

They are hunched over their desks, and they stare at the screen, their eyes a strange yellowy-green in the light from the television. Their breathing seems heavier, excited, as they watch the orangutans and spider monkeys swing from tree branches and chase one another, howl and yell across the jungle. They call back to the monkeys and to each other, and it seems they are talking to one another in a real language, one they all understand. Even after the film ends, they continue to call, back and forth across the room, across the tree tops and vines, the rivers.

When I turn on the lights, the students are changed, into little wild things with fur and sharp teeth and small brains. I can see long, slender tails brushing the floor next to their desks. Their clothes are too big for them, and they pull at them and frown. Their bodies are elastic and strong, and if they chose to, they could set upon me, and I would not be able to fight them off. Small as they are, they are stronger than I am, but they don't seem to know this. "It's time for a report," I tell them, and I see their eyes get wide. They begin to make noises—chattering, and a few growls, and their wrinkled hands grope around in their desks until they bring out pencils, erasers, boxes of crayons and bottles of glue. "Just the pencils," I tell them, and they put them in their mouths and return the rest of the materials to the desks. "I would like you to tell me about evolution," I say, as I pass out sheets of writing paper. "Tell me how we evolve."

THE SECOND SIGHTING OF SAINT ANTHONY

Alexander saw Saint Anthony on a Monday during recess. The fourth, fifth, and sixth graders were on the playground kicking up gray dust and gravel as they ran from the swings to the jungle gym, and we sat on the old, rough wooden benches at the intersection of the gravel and the softball field. Mrs. Phillips and Mrs. Johns were arguing about the placement of tulip bulbs. “You don’t want to put them next to trees,” Mrs. Phillips said impatiently, like she was talking to one of her students, one of the bad ones. She picked at a thread on her yellow sweater. “Trees just don’t allow them enough light.” Mrs. Johns said she had read that some trees were good for tulips because their leaves added more acid to the soil, but Mrs. Phillips said she had never read anything like that. I was grading math quizzes. The kids would probably have to take them over again because they hadn’t paid attention during the lesson, and I thought about the lecture I would give them when we all went back inside. It was a sunny, cold day and we were sitting in a bright patch of sunlight. My feet were sweaty in my shoes, but I didn’t kick them off.

“You don’t have a garden, do you, Jeanette?” Mrs. Johns asked me, and I shook my head.

“I don’t really have the time,” I said. “They take a lot of work. And besides, I rent. My landlady takes care of the yard.” Mrs. Johns and Mrs. Phillips smiled at each other, and Mrs. Johns shook her head in that way she had that always made me feel like she wanted to take me home and cook a meal for me, like she wanted to slip me a twenty dollar bill or give me a bag of groceries. It started the day I began work at the school, close to five years ago now. We had a faculty meeting just before summer school started

in June, and the principal introduced me to the rest of the teachers. “Ms. Farris just finished graduate school in May,” he said, and put his hands together like he was going to start clapping. “It’ll be good to have some new blood around here.” The teachers all smiled at me, and Mrs. Johns leaned over and patted my arm, like she was my mother. “It’s so nice to have you here,” she said.

After that, she would come by my classroom to check on me, to see if I needed any staples or colored pencils, or if I wanted to have lunch with her. She brought me folders, stencils to use on the bulletin board, a purple grade book she’d bought at the teacher’s supply store when she saw I didn’t have one yet. I think she thought of me like I was her project, like if she took good enough care of me I would become efficient and organized and would appreciate her for it. I kept expecting her to bring me clothes or shoes or something personal like that, a nightgown, something my mother would have sent me in a care package when I was in college. “I saw this in the store and couldn’t help but think of you,” I’d imagine her saying, handing me a blouse with flowers on it or a pair of pink socks. Sometimes when she wasn’t looking I would bare my teeth at her or stick my tongue out. I would make the ugliest faces I could behind her back and dare her to turn around and catch me. I felt like a little kid when I did it, but it was satisfying.

“Gardening does take work,” Mrs. Johns said. “But it’s worth it. I love the feeling of raising something by hand, and besides, you never know what you’re going to get in the grocery store these days. You pay so much money for produce, and within a couple of days you can’t even use it. It sits around in a truck for weeks before you even see it.” She brought me tomatoes and cucumbers, sometimes squash, from her garden, and I always made sure to thank her and tell her how beautiful the vegetables were. They rotted in my

refrigerator until I threw them away. During the summer she brought me Tupperware containers of salad made with lettuce and tomatoes and herbs she had grown, and she watched as I ate them for lunch. “You need more leafy greens in your diet,” she would say, and I told her she was probably right.

When the bell rang, it was time to go back inside. We stood up and waved our arms, cupped our hands around our mouths and shouted. Mrs. Phillips blew short bursts on a track whistle. After a few minutes, the entire fifth and sixth grade classes were lined up beside Mrs. Phillips and Mrs. Johns. The students talked and giggled and pushed one another, and the teachers waited until they were all quiet and in line one behind the other before they walked back toward the building. Mrs. Johns looked back at me sympathetically as they left the playground. I yelled again for my students, and then began to walk toward the large elm tree at the outer edge of the playground.

For some reason, the students liked to gather at the tree—probably because we couldn’t see them very well from the benches. Occasionally we’d hear screams or loud laughter and shouts coming from behind the tree, and one of us would go investigate, but most of the time we just left them alone. Mrs. Johns always said that children needed their privacy too, just like adults, and besides, they couldn’t get into much trouble outside. Still, I never felt comfortable leaving them for too long without checking on them, and I usually did so at least once every recess. Mrs. Phillips and Mrs. Johns said I was still so young (they meant naïve), and that sooner or later I would stop worrying so much. “They won’t kill each other,” Mrs. Johns always said. She seemed proud of herself when she said it, like she’d really come up with something profound, and Mrs. Phillips would nod. “Kids this age are going to fight,” she said, “and they’re going to harass one

another. But it's important to let them work it out among themselves. We shouldn't be interfering all the time. They don't learn anything that way." I would nod at them, would tell them this made sense, but I knew they just didn't want to be bothered. They had been teachers a long time, and they were tired. I always kept a close watch on my students. I worried about them. "You have to remember you're not their mother," Mrs. Phillips said.

When I got to the tree, the students were standing in a circle around Alex. He was kneeling on the ground next to the tree, his head bent, and my first thought was that he must have a nosebleed. He got them sometimes when he was excited, and most of the time he had to be sent to the nurse's office for an hour or two to calm down before he could return to class. He hated the sight of blood, and had passed out a couple of times when he'd had a nosebleed. As I got close to him I could tell he was shaking. I broke through the circle and went to him, reaching in my pocket for a Kleenex. The rest of the students stood and watched as I knelt down beside Alex. "Alex," I said, holding the Kleenex in front of his face, "here. Put pressure on it."

"It's not a nosebleed," Michael, who bullied Alex sometimes and who I often had to yell at, said. "He's been like that for almost twenty minutes now."

"We were going to come and get you," Sara said when I looked up at them. She glared at Michael.

"What is it, Alex?" I asked him, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Did one of you say something to him?" I looked up at the other students, and they shook their heads. Alex's mother, Laura, had died of pancreatic cancer a few months ago. Everyone had known she was dying, it would be quick, but I don't think we realized how much it would change her. Laura had never been especially pretty, but she'd always been attractive. She

never left the house without makeup and a nice outfit, and everyone called her “cute” like she was still a little girl. She stopped caring when she got sick, and when she lost her hair from the chemo she looked at least ten years older than she was. Most of the time she wore brightly colored scarves or hats, but sometimes when she came to pick Alex up from school, her head was bare. Her face was puffy and strange looking, like it was made out of yellow rubber. I heard one of the kids saying she looked like an alien, and I gave him extra homework for saying it, but he was right. It was hard not to stare at her when you saw her on the street. After a couple months, she stopped going out. When anyone asked about her, Alex said she was tired, that she was sleeping a lot.

I came to visit her once, but Alex’s father said she couldn’t see anyone and he would tell her I’d stopped by. He came to the door looking ruffled, like he had just woken up. His dark hair was dirty, and he smelled a little stale. He smiled at me, but the corners of his mouth barely moved. His face was white, like it had no blood. Alex was a sensitive boy. He liked to read and loved animals, and the other teachers said his father was just like him. Patrick and I hadn’t spoken much, but I’d heard he was having a hard time. “She’ll appreciate your coming to see her,” Patrick said, and I told him I’d been meaning to for a long time. “You’re busy,” he said, and shrugged. “Things slip away from you.”

When Laura died, the town felt relieved. We felt bad for Alex, for Patrick, but we didn’t have to see her anymore. We didn’t really even have to think about her. We brought casseroles and cakes, attended the funeral, and wrote sympathy cards. Everyone said how sorry they were. I went by the house again with a plate of cookies and a card, but Patrick didn’t answer the door. The lights were on and I heard the TV in the living

room, but no one came even though I knocked and knocked. I left the cookies and the card on the porch. I called a few days later, but I had to leave a message and no one ever called me back. Alex missed two weeks of school, but when he came back he seemed perfectly fine. The school psychologist told me not to bring it up unless Alex said he wanted to talk about it, and he didn't. I saw Patrick again at the parent-teacher conferences two months after the funeral, but we didn't talk about anything but Alex's grades. Patrick looked better, cleaner, like he'd been sleeping normally, and when I smiled at him, he smiled back.

"Are you okay?" I asked Alex again, shaking his shoulder gently. He looked up at me, and his eyes were wide and dark blue, the pupils dilated.

"He says he saw a man standing next to the tree," Sara said. "But there wasn't anyone there."

I moved toward the woods beyond the playground. "A man? Did he say something to you?" The students just looked at me, some shaking their heads slowly.

"There wasn't a man," Sara said. "Alex was the only one who saw anything."

"No one else saw anything?" I asked them. "There wasn't anyone there? Are you sure?"

"We looked!" Jordan said loudly. His nose was running, and he wiped it with his hand before he continued. "Stephen and Josh and I went into the woods looking for him, but there wasn't anybody there." When he said this, the rest of the kids stared at him. All students were forbidden to set foot in the woods. If they did and we found out, they would have to stay after school for a week and their parents would be notified.

Three years ago, there had been a homeless man living in the woods with his dog. He'd had a blue tent that you could see from the playground. The students weren't supposed to go into the woods, but they often did. They knew they'd only be told to write sentences if they were caught, and it was worth the thrill of seeing the homeless man up close. One day a girl named Vanessa went into the woods and came out with her shorts torn and her legs scratched and bruised. She was screaming and crying. We called the police, and they arrested the homeless man. He swore he didn't do anything wrong, that Vanessa was lying, but he had marks on his face. Vanessa said she had scratched him to get him to leave her alone. After that the students were never, ever supposed to go into the woods. We told them Vanessa had to go to another school now because of what had happened to her, and if they weren't careful it could happen to them, too. We told them to tell us and their parents right away if they ever saw anyone in the woods. Some of the teachers went to the tent afterward and took it down. We brought the dog to the animal shelter. I went back to check on it a few weeks later, and they said it had had distemper and had to be put down.

“Jordan, Stephen, Josh—detention for a week,” I said. “You know you're not supposed to go in there. Why didn't one of you come and get me?”

“We were going to, Ms. Farris,” Sara said, “we really were. We didn't want to leave Alex alone.” She looked at me, trying to gauge my reaction. Sara knew I didn't like her very much. She was bossy and loud, a know-it-all. I couldn't stand her.

“Well, one of you should have come to get me,” I said, “I think all of you deserve sentences for acting so irresponsibly.” The students groaned, and a couple stamped their feet in the dirt.

“Alex,” I said, leaning my head next to his, “let’s go back inside, okay? Or I can take you to the nurse’s office and we can talk about what happened. But let’s get out of the dirt.” Alex pulled his head away from mine and slowly stood up. He moved stiffly.

“He had light all around him,” he said. “And he was tall, taller than anyone I’ve ever seen. He was a giant.”

I brought Alex to the nurse’s office, and told him to lie down for a while. When I came back to the classroom, the students were out of their seats, talking and laughing. “Is Alex going to be okay, Ms. Farris?” Sara asked as I sat down at my desk.

“He’ll be fine,” I said. “He just needs to rest a while.”

“He said the man he saw was tall, and he was wearing some sort of weird robe or something,” Michael said. “He said he looked like someone you’d see in the Bible. But none of the rest of us saw anything.”

“Are you sure?” I asked the class, standing up with my hands on my hips. “Was someone playing a trick on Alex, maybe?” I looked at Vaughn. He was the tallest boy in the class, almost my height, and he could have passed for a grown man if you didn’t see his face very well. Vaughn shook his head.

“Nobody played a trick on him,” Sara said, and the other students nodded. “We wouldn’t do that.”

“Good,” I said. I gave them all a hundred sentences to write about how they would not go into the woods again and how they would respect each other. When they grumbled about having to write, I gave them another hundred. I watched them as they scribbled and wanted to give them even more to write, just because I could.

I went to check on Alex while the students were in music class. He seemed better. His pupils were back to normal, and his face had more color. He was sitting on a cot coloring a picture of a house with a family standing next to it. There was a little boy, a little girl, a mother, a father, and a dog and a cat. They all smiled wide and held hands, even the animals. The house had a chimney with plumes of gray smoke coming out of it, and pink and blue and red flowers in the yard. "How're you doing, kiddo?" I asked Alex, as I sat down next to him on the small cot.

"I'm fine," he said, and continued coloring.

"Tell me about this man you saw," I said.

"He looked at me," he said, "and there was this light behind him, all around him. He was glowing. It looked like he was wearing a dress, and he had a cross on a rope for a belt. His hands and his face glowed too."

"He was glowing?" I asked, "Like he was holding a flashlight?"

"No, brighter," Alex said, and picked at the dark green plastic of the cot. "He was tall, and bright. He looked like he should be in a movie, like he wasn't real."

"Did he say anything to you?"

"He said he would help me if I wanted him to. He said he helps people get back things they lost."

"What did you say back to him?"

"I said okay. He told me not to be afraid, and I said I wasn't."

"Why were you kneeling on the ground when I got there?" I asked him. I could tell he didn't want to talk about it anymore, but I couldn't help it.

“I don’t know,” Alex said. “He put his hand on my head. It was heavy. He pressed his hand against my head. Can I go back to class now?”

Alex was quiet when we went back into the classroom, and the other kids left him alone. I saw them looking at him, but when they caught me looking at them, they frowned and turned away. They didn’t say much the rest of the day, just spoke when they were spoken to and did what they were told. I wrote their homework assignment on the board, and we waited together for the bell to signal it was time to go home. As they were packing up their book bags, I told them I had something very important to tell them. “Guys,” I said, clapping my hands together, “nobody likes a gossip. I want you all to be careful what you say about what happened today at the tree.” They looked at each other, then at Alex, and then they nodded. “Alex, please tell your father I would like to speak with him. He can call me at home.”

When they left, I went out to the playground. First, I sat on the bench and looked across the playground to the tree. The bright winter sun shone on its leaves, making them seem Hamlinr, like they were lit up from the inside. The sky was clear and almost white. I heard the last of the buses leaving the parking lot, the students in the after-school program shouting. I walked across the gravel to the tree and sat down next to it. It was cold in the shade, and I listened to the birds calling to each other in the woods. I waited there a long time, until the sun started to go down and everything got dark, but I didn’t see anything. When I got home, I went to bed. I heard the phone ringing for a while, and then the answering machine picked up. I listened to Patrick say hello and tell me Alex had told him to call. I lay in bed for another hour, and then called Patrick back. Alex answered, and put Patrick on without saying anything when I asked for him.

“Did Alex tell you about what happened today?” I asked him, and I could tell he was lying when he said no. I explained it to him, told him about the man and Alex’s reaction to him, said that the other students had told me they hadn’t seen anything. “I think it might have something to do with Laura,” I said. “He might be projecting, making up some kind of miracle to deal with his grief. Sometimes it happens when kids don’t know how to share their emotions. Do you and Alex ever talk about her? Do you listen to him when he gets upset?”

“Of course we talk about her,” Patrick said. “But I don’t think it has anything to do with this. He’s a kid. They see things sometimes. I don’t think it’s anything to worry about.” I said I hoped this was true. “Listen,” I said, “maybe we should talk about this more. I worry about Alex. He’s such a good kid, but so quiet. I worry that he’s not holding up like he should be. Could we meet for coffee, maybe, or lunch? I just feel like we should talk.”

Patrick was quiet, then he cleared his throat. He said he had to go, that he and Alex were watching a movie and wanted to finish it before it was time for Alex to go to bed. “Thanks for calling,” he said. “I do appreciate your concern.” And then he hung up.

A few days later, Alex came in with a rosary in his hand. He put it in front of him on his desk, and kept a hand on it, touching each of the beads with a finger, as he read silently to himself. The beads were made from a dark wood, almost black, and they were shiny with age, worn smooth. When I told Alex they were pretty, he thanked me and put them in his pocket. When I asked if I could hold them, he said no. “They’re my dad’s,” he said, “he’s had them since he was little.”

“Does he know you have them?” I asked him, and he nodded.

“He told me I could keep them,” he said, “but he said to make sure I kept them to myself.” I nodded and went back to my desk, but after a few minutes I went back over to Alex.

“Have you seen the man again, Alex?” I asked him quietly. He nodded. “Where did you see him?”

“The same place as before,” he said. “He said he’d always come to the tree when he wanted to talk to me.”

“Did he say why he wanted to talk to you?” I asked him, putting my hand on his shoulder. His small muscles were tense.

Alex shook his head. He wouldn’t look at me. “He just likes to,” he said. “He’s going to come again tomorrow, at recess. He said it’s important.”

“Have you told anyone you saw him again?” I asked.

“No,” he said.

I nodded back at him and patted him on the shoulder. “Good.” I called Patrick from my cell phone during lunch, but he didn’t answer. I left a message asking him to call me back.

That evening, after I had eaten dinner and written my lesson plans for the next day, I took a shower and washed my hair, then got dressed. I wanted to look nice, but casual. I put on a green sweater and jeans, nice ones. I blow dried my hair and put on lip gloss, a bit of perfume. On the way to Patrick’s house, I stopped at a coffee shop and bought two cups of coffee and a couple raspberry scones. They were the only two left in the pastry case, and I could tell they weren’t fresh. They were heavy in the brown paper bag the girl behind the counter handed me.

When I got to Patrick's house, there was a dark red car in the driveway. It looked familiar, but I couldn't place it. I knew I had seen it before. I held the tray with the coffees in it tightly in my hand and balanced the bag of scones on it as I walked up the steps to the porch. I knocked on the door. After a few seconds, Patrick opened it. He stared at me.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"I thought we could talk," I said. "Just for a few minutes." I held up the coffee and smiled.

"I have company," he said, "but you can come in if you want to." He held open the door for me, and followed me inside. "The living room's through there," he said, pointing at a doorway past the kitchen. On the wall in the living room, I saw a large picture of Jesus standing in a grassy field with a group of children around him. They were all smiling, and Jesus had his hand on a little girl's blonde head. Next to the picture was a small wooden cross. There was a photograph of Laura on top of the television.

Mrs. Johns was sitting on the couch with Alex beside her. Their heads were close together, and they were smiling at each other.

"Well this is a surprise," Mrs. Johns said when she saw me. "I didn't know you and Jeanette were friends, Pat." She smiled at me, and then looked at Patrick.

"Alex is in my class," I said, not smiling back. I put the scones and coffee down on an end table. "I came to talk about Alex."

“It’s not a good time,” Patrick said. “Couldn’t we just talk at school tomorrow? I have to pick Alex up for a doctor’s appointment in the afternoon anyway. He has a check up.”

“What are you doing here, anyway?” I said to Mrs. Johns. She frowned slightly.

“I’ve been a friend of the family for years,” she said. “Laura was in my class my first year teaching.”

“I didn’t know that,” I said.

“Well, why would you?” Mrs. Johns asked, smiling at me again. “Pat, I’m happy to take Alex out for ice cream or something if you and Jeanette need to talk privately. Jeanette, you look very pretty, by the way. You should wear that lipstick all the time.”

“No,” Patrick said, looking at Mrs. Johns. “Please stay. I’d really rather talk about this tomorrow.”

“All right,” I said, and started walking toward the door. “I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon.”

“I’ll come a few minutes early,” Patrick said.

“You’re leaving your coffee, Jeanette,” Mrs. Johns called after me as I walked out, but I didn’t turn around.

The next day the students were quiet, solemn, even though I told them we were going on a field trip to the zoo in a week and passed out permission slips. “Now be sure to get these signed right away,” I said. “You can’t go unless I have a slip on file for you.” They nodded and tucked the slips into their book bags, but they didn’t seem excited at all. I made them draw their favorite animals on a big piece of construction paper and wrote all of the students’ names next to their animals. Then I labeled it “Ms. Farris’s Zoo” and

hung it up on the wall beside my desk. Sloppily drawn monkeys and lions and alligators stared down at me as I sat there. After an hour or so I took the poster down and moved it to the other side of the room. I carefully taped it to the wall, and turned around to face the class again when I was finished. “There,” I said. Alex was looking at me, but he put his head down again when I looked back at him and smiled. “Alex, your father is coming to pick you up this afternoon, isn’t he?” I asked him. “He told me yesterday that you have a doctor’s appointment.”

“Not today,” he said. “It’s not until next week.”

“Are you sure?” I asked him. “Your father said you had a check up today.”

“It’s next week,” Alex said, and he didn’t look at me again.

I called Patrick from the teachers’ lounge at lunch time, but the machine picked up so I called him at work. His secretary said he was out, but that he would call me back as soon as he got back. “Please tell him it’s important,” I said. “It’s an emergency.”

When it was time for recess, instead of sitting on the bench with the other teachers, I walked around the playground. I tried to stay away from the students, to let them play on their own, but I couldn’t help watching them closely. After playing kickball and climbing the jungle gym for a while, the students moved toward the tree. It looked rehearsed, like they had planned it. Alex led the way. I moved with them, but they didn’t seem to notice me. Pretty soon, they were all there, just like they had been the first time. Some of them sat down around the tree, and others stood on the little hill next to it. They didn’t say anything, just stood there like they were waiting for something. I watched them, and they looked older, their faces drawn tight. Alex kneeled next to the tree and

clasped his hands together. When I walked up to them, they didn't say anything or even look at me. They just moved aside so I could join them.

"What are you all doing?" I asked them, but Sara raised her finger to her lips.

"Be quiet," she said, so I didn't say anything else. I knelt down beside Alex, but he ignored me.

We waited there. I heard Mrs. Phillips' whistle blowing, heard her and Mrs. Johns shouting for their students to join them. I heard Mrs. Johns calling my name. She shouted it three or four times. Then she and her students were standing in front of us. They asked us what we were doing and said it was time to go inside, recess was over. "This is ridiculous," Mrs. Phillips said. But none of us moved. We didn't look at each other, didn't say a word, but we stayed where we were. Alex held his rosary and moved his fingers along the beads, his lips moving silently. "Go get the principal," Mrs. Johns told one of her students, and I heard her feet on the gravel as she ran toward the building. "Jeanette, you've got to stop this," Mrs. Johns said. "You can't keep these children out here in the cold." She put her hand on my shoulder and shook it, but I put my head down and stayed still. "Jeanette," she said again. I watched the woods behind the tree and prayed along with Alex. I moved my lips silently, asking Saint Anthony to bring us back what we had lost.

MARCH

The kids are taking a math test. They tap their pencils on their desks and sigh, lean their heads back, crack their knuckles. I can hear their stomachs growling. I feel a little guilty for making them take a test right before lunch. It's raining, and the classroom is dark even with the fluorescent lights and the blinds drawn to let in as much light from outside as possible. It has rained every day for the last three weeks—sometimes an entire day goes by without it stopping for more than an hour or so. The rivers are flooding, and the mayor is considering calling a state of emergency. There are stories on the news every night about it. People are coming home to find their basements full of water, their yards turned into swamps. Some people have left town, and no one knows where they've gone. Everything is strange, unfamiliar, green and brown and blurred like we're living at the bottom of a lake.

On top of this, the parents are upset about a vagrant who's been seen around the school since the rain started. We get calls every day threatening to pull students out, to call the board of trustees, if we don't take care of him, but there's nothing we can do. So far he hasn't come onto school property, and besides, the police chase him away whenever they see him. He hasn't been near the kids. The principal has the cops on regular patrol, and they usually stand around in the parking lot looking bored. There's a patch of woods behind the school that belongs to the county, and we think this must be where he's staying. We don't see any signs of him during the day, but one of the janitors who comes in to work at 4 a.m. said he saw him leaving the woods one morning with a rolled up sleeping bag and what looked like a tent under his arm. The janitor said he had a dog, too. All of the teachers call the vagrant a "tramp." They ask me if I've seen the

tramp, if I think he's really pitched a tent out in the woods. "What does he eat?" they ask. "What will he do when winter comes?" Hamlin isn't used to homeless people. According to the other teachers, the town has never had any before. The vagrant is their first. If they weren't so earnest in their concern I would laugh at them. I tell them he'll probably stay for a while and then move on, this is usually what homeless people do, but they seem to think he's going to be here forever.

Aside from curiosity about the vagrant, the kids don't seem to care about any of this. They hate the rain, they say. They are restless, cranky at being forced to have recess in the gym instead of the playground. They say they're sick of basketball, and volleyball is boring. They throw the basketballs against the wall as hard as they can until I tell them to stop. They are tired. They say they want to sit outside in the sun and ask me if I remember what it was like outside before the rain. That's how they talk about it: "before the rain." Like it's biblical or something they've read about in their history book. The classroom smells damp, like old glue and wet construction paper. It's hard to breathe. There's mildew in the supply closet. I found it all over a pile of brand new workbooks yesterday, and didn't even try to clean them. I just threw them in the trash.

I should be walking around the room now, making sure the kids aren't looking at one another's papers, but instead I sit at my desk drinking coffee. They're used to this. "You're in fifth grade," I always tell them, "you have to be responsible for yourselves." I think they would rather I punish them, give them lectures and make a big deal out of it when they do something wrong, but it would bother them if I started checking up on them now. They have fifteen minutes left before they have to turn in their tests and go to lunch, and I write "15" in giant numbers on the chalkboard. They look up when they hear the

chalk squeaking, see the numbers, and go back to their work without acknowledging me. I look out the window at the rain, and think I see someone walking outside, someone tall, but I can't get a good look at him because my cell phone buzzes in my pocket and by the time I look down and then back up at the window, he's gone. My ex-wife Rachel hasn't called me in almost three months, but I guess she must have heard about the rain and decided to check in. I look back outside, but I don't see anyone there. After a few seconds the phone buzzes again, and I have to hold myself back from checking my voicemail right there in the classroom. The students probably wouldn't even notice, but I'll force myself to wait until lunch. I know if I don't, I'll just feel stupid for making a big deal about it.

I was married to Rachel for thirteen years, and then she decided our relationship had stagnated. "I don't have a good reason," she said. "I'm just bored. I know you're bored too." I was, but I still loved her. We had an eleven-year-old daughter named Anna, a big ugly house neither of us had ever liked that much, and two dogs Rachel wanted to keep. She insisted, and I didn't argue with her for long. I know she thought I would fight her, but it didn't make sense to me to fight. None of it made sense to me then. It doesn't even make sense now, over a year later. Rachel wanted to move to New York to be closer to her family, and I said fine. We agreed that Anna could come and visit me whenever she wanted. I told Anna this over and over again. Rachel and I decided to put the house up for sale in April and I moved into an apartment a couple of towns away, applied for teaching jobs there and got hired at Hamlin Elementary. I was the only male teacher there, the first one they'd had in a number of years. It was weird at first, but then I got used to it. Rachel sent me emails telling me about her moving plans, how many people

had come to look at the house, and how her job search was going. She sounded excited about everything. On the day she and Anna left for New York we had breakfast at the doughnut shop down the street from our house. Anna was crying so much she couldn't eat her doughnuts, and when I told her she could live with me if she wanted, she didn't have to go to New York, Rachel got angry. "Don't say that," she said, crushing her napkin in her fist. "You're going to love New York," she told Anna, smiling at her and lightly touching her hair. Anna pulled away from her, and when it was time for them to go she just got into the car and wouldn't get out, not even to give me a hug goodbye. I made her roll down the window and leaned in as far as I could, put my arms around her and squeezed tightly.

After they left I had the whole summer on my own to prepare for teaching and to make the apartment livable. I was alone and could do what I wanted without answering to anyone for the first time in thirteen years. It felt like an adventure. I ordered take out and watched television, looked at personal ads online. I made brownies and cakes from boxed mixes and ate them out of the pans they were baked in. I bought cheap curtains from Big Lots with sailboats and anchors on them and hung them in the living room. Sometimes I even looked at porn. Nothing was serious, especially not my life. Anna called sometimes, and I called her, but we never talked about anything important. I made her laugh, and we talked about the fun things we'd do when she came to visit. I felt like I was in one of those friendly divorce movies where the middle-aged folks think they've fallen out of love and get divorced but are still kind to one another and then one day, after one of them has started seeing someone else, they realize they're still in love, they always have been. They were just bored, like everyone gets bored.

Since school began, Rachel calls less and less. When she does, it's usually about Anna, how she isn't adjusting to her new school or the town and she's not making a lot of friends, how Rachel worries about her. "She's eleven," I say. "Eleven year olds aren't always quick to adjust. She'll be okay." Sometimes I tell her to send Anna to come and stay with me for a while, but Rachel doesn't want to take her out of school. She's a good parent, and she adores Anna. I adore Anna too, but I'm here now. She'll come to visit in a few months when school lets out, and in the meantime I tell Rachel not to worry so much. I say the same thing to Anna when we talk on the phone, or over email. She always says she knows things are going to be fine, and I tell her how brave I think she is.

The students who are already finished have their heads on their desks. I can hear a faint snore coming from one boy in the corner, and when some of the girls see me looking at him, they start to giggle. I hold my finger to my lips to shush them, and they frown and look down at their tests. They slump down in their desks, their bodies rounding, curling in on themselves. I hope I can let them go out to the playground for recess, even if it's only to walk around a little. All of this sitting inside seems to be slowing them down somehow. They're beginning to seem not like children at all, but something withered and weak, like they're getting older. They hunch more, seem less flexible. I feel older too, like my body is made of mud instead of bones and muscles. I'm heavy and thick and slow. I tell myself it will get better once the rain stops, that when it clears up we will all feel better.

Something is moving outside again, and this time I'm able to focus on it long enough to see that it's the vagrant. He's walking across the playground with his head down, a shabby-looking black dog trailing behind him. This is the first time I have seen

him on school grounds, and he seems fearless. I watch him and the dog move across the playground slowly, like they are tired as well, and a couple of the kids see me looking out the window and look too. I can hear them start to whisper excitedly to one another, am pretty sure I hear the word “tramp,” when I clear my throat.

“Time’s up,” I say, looking up at the clock pointedly. “Pass up your tests. It’s almost noon. Time to get ready for lunch.” The kids continue to look out the window at the man until I clear my throat again, this time much louder, and then they put down their pencils and pass up their tests, then rummage around in their desks for their lunches. Some take out lunch boxes—small plastic ones with cartoon characters on them, miniature coolers in primary colors, and soft, insulated bags with Velcro fastenings. The others have lunch money, which they take out of their pockets and count, grasping wilted dollar bills in their moist hands. “Mr. Carson,” one of them says, pointing to the window, “look. There he is.”

“I see him,” I say. “There’s nothing to worry about. He’s not going to bother anybody.”

“My mom says we shouldn’t give him any money,” another one says.

“He’ll probably not even ask you for money,” I say, “but if he does, tell me.”

They nod. On their way to the coat closet to get their umbrellas and raincoats, some of the kids stop at the windows and stare at the man and the dog. I have to tell them twice to keep going.

I line the kids up for lunch and walk with them to the cafeteria, the newest building on the campus. It doesn’t belong at an elementary school. It is large and made of brick and glass, painted inside in shades of green and pale purple. There are ratty bunches

of fake flowers on every table, faded roses and daisies with dust so thick on their petals that they look gray instead of white. The kids have done a number on the flowers, twisting their petals between their sticky fingers, pulling plastic stamens and pistils out and dropping them on the floor. I wish the cafeteria workers would just throw the flowers away, but they don't. The teachers tell me the cafeteria was a gift from a parent of a student who died, some million dollar donation in the kid's name, and the school treats it like a shrine. I've looked for a plaque or something to identify the student, but I haven't been able to find it yet. The kids stare at the vagrant as we walk past him, craning their necks as they look up at him, but he doesn't look at them. The dog strains on its leash and sniffs at the kids, and they solemnly reach out to pet it. I feel like I should say something to the man, should ask him if he needs anything or at least tell him not to stick around too long. He doesn't pay any attention to me. I tell the kids to keep their hands to themselves.

The rain has started up heavier, and the kids spin their umbrellas and stomp in puddles with their rain boots. This is the most energetic I've seen them all day, all week even. They make noises and talk loudly, like they're trying to get the vagrant's attention. I hurry them along, tell them they're not going to have any time for lunch if they don't get going. The kids move a little faster, but they still hold back and watch the vagrant. I can't help looking at him either. Though he hunches over so much it's hard to tell exactly how tall he is, it's clear he's over six feet, probably about six and a half. He's bulked up by layers of clothing, but I can tell he's skinny, with long legs and arms. He's wearing a dirty blue knit cap over long stringy hair and a khaki wool overcoat which strangely looks new. I can't see his face, but I want to.

I usher the kids into the cafeteria and make sure those who are buying lunch get into the right line and those who aren't get to our table. The kids pick at their lunches, don't talk, and so the cafeteria is quiet except for the servers clanking utensils around and yelling to one another about what's needed on the line. They don't seem to notice how silent the kids are and make the same amount of noise as usual. Everything sounds hollow, like we're in the hull of a ship. I can't hear the rain outside, but it streams down the windows. I ask the monitor to keep an eye on the kids for a few minutes. "Forgot something in the classroom," I say, "be right back," and she smiles and nods. She likes me, says I go above and beyond. It's not required for me to eat lunch with the kids, and most of the teachers don't. I tried having lunch in the lounge with the rest of the teachers for a few days when I first started at Hamlin, but I never felt comfortable. Too much gossip, too much talk about kids and husbands. I didn't have anything to say. The kids ignore me when I'm at the table with them, or sometimes they ask me about the things we've talked about in class, and this is okay with me.

It's pouring when I go back outside. I put up my umbrella, but I can feel my back and feet getting wet as soon as I start moving. I can't see the vagrant anywhere, though he wasn't moving very fast when we passed him. He couldn't have gone far. I walk back toward the classroom looking for him the entire way, the rain soaking through my shoes. The campus looks deserted, despite the lights coming from the classrooms. I can see the silhouettes of kids through the windows of some of the classrooms, many of them leaning over their desks. None of them seem to be moving at all. The vagrant and his dog are gone. Everything is quiet and, except for the rain, still.

I'm wet and cold when I get back into the building, and my phone starts ringing. It's Rachel again. "What is it?" I answer, my hands so wet I practically drop the phone.

"Hello to you too," she says, sounding exhausted and cranky.

"Sorry. Everything okay?"

"Not really. Anna got into a fight today. Some nasty little bitch has been picking on her. She finally fought back. She's suspended for three days."

"Why didn't you tell me someone's been picking on her? She hasn't said anything about it. Is she okay?"

"She's fine. She punched the other girl in the mouth and chipped a tooth. We'll probably have to pay the dentist. Listen, she wants to come and live with you. She's miserable here."

"It can't be that bad," I say.

"She says she'd rather live in Hamlin than New York," Rachel says. "I keep telling her things will get better, but I'm starting to wonder myself. She's not doing as well in school as she used to, and I know she's not happy here. I just don't know what to do."

"Of course she can come and stay with me. I would love to have her here, you know that. I'd love it." I'm already thinking of how we can decorate the apartment, of how we can redo my office into a bedroom.

"What about school?" Rachel asks. "I don't think she should go to the same school where you work. That would be really weird for her."

"She'll go to Sacred Heart. It's a better school anyway."

Rachel sighs. "Do you think she'll like going to a Catholic school?"

“She’ll be fine,” I say. “I’ll give them a call, see what their admissions process is like.” Rachel doesn’t sound happy, but we hang up after I tell her I’ll call Sacred Heart and call her back.

He’s standing at the chalkboard in my classroom when I get there, with his back to me. There’s a pool of water around his feet, and the dog is curled up on the floor under one of the desks and wagging its tail. The entire room smells like dog and sweat, something deeper and faintly sweet, like earth.

“Hello?” I say as I walk into the room, and the vagrant turns around and looks at me. He has a piece of chalk in his hand, and puts it down when he sees me looking at it. He has erased the homework assignment from the board and has written, in very small letters, “I rejected the Voice of Providence” in its place. My copy of *Robinson Crusoe* is open on my desk. We are both quiet for a few seconds, and then he talks.

“How old are your students?” he asks, and motions to the desks like the kids are still in them. His face is pale, and so are his eyes. Light green, or maybe hazel. He doesn’t look like I expected him to—there is nothing distinct about his features, nothing threatening.

“Fifth grade,” I say. “Why are you here?”

“It’s somewhere dry,” he says.

“You can’t stay,” I say, “especially not with the dog. The kids will be back soon.”

“We’ll leave in a minute,” he says. “Don’t worry.”

“Are you really staying in the woods?” I ask him. “Haven’t the cops spoken to you?”

He shrugs. “They can’t do anything,” he says. “You know that.”

“But they can make it hard on you,” I say. “They can probably put you in jail or something. You know, the students’ parents are getting upset. They’re worried you’re going to do something.”

“What do they think I’m going to do? I’m not going to molest their kids.” He laughs. It sounds like a cough.

“Hell if I know,” I say, trying to laugh with him, trying to be cool. “They’re easily riled around here.”

“Most people are,” he says.

“I have a daughter,” I say, and he nods, not sure where I’m going with this. “I have a daughter, and—I’m *not* easily riled, I mean, not much bothers me, but I’d worry if there was some strange guy hanging around my daughter’s school. She’s in New York now, but she’s coming to live here soon. Probably within the month. And I’d concerned if she gets here and there’s someone hanging around her school, even if he’s harmless.” I take a breath. “No offense, but it would worry me.”

“You’re a dad,” he says, smiling. “Of course you’d be concerned. But there’s no reason for anyone here to worry. George and I’ll be gone in a couple of days, then everyone will be able to rest easy.”

“So why did you pick my classroom?” I ask him. “There are a lot of other classes at lunch right now.” I wonder if he paid more attention to us when we passed him than he let on, if he noticed me and thought I might sympathize with him.

“No reason,” he says, “it was the first one I came to.” He looks at me.

“Listen,” I say, smiling at him, “I’ve got my lunch here, but I wasn’t planning to eat it. All this rain’s made me lose my appetite. Do you want it? It’s just a couple of

sandwiches and some chips, a banana, I think, but it's yours if you want it." I go over to my desk and take out the plastic grocery bag with my lunch inside. I hold it out to him.

"Sure," he says, and takes it. "Thanks."

"No problem," I say. He calls the dog over to him, then unwraps the first sandwich and gives it to the dog, then eats the other one himself. In less than five minutes, the food is gone. He drops the banana peel and the chip and sandwich bags back into the grocery bag, then throws it in the trash can. He looks like he's getting ready to leave, is straightening his jacket, gathering up his sleeping bag and tent.

"So where are you coming from?" I ask him, leaning against my desk, hoping I look casual, trying to feel that way. He makes me nervous, and I want him to stay here, to talk to me, but I'm not sure why. He is the only person I've wanted to talk to in months—at least, he's the only person here, in this place, I've wanted to talk to.

"I was in New Jersey for a while," he says, "then Connecticut. Got too cold. Then we went down South. I liked it there, but after a while it was time to keep moving. I don't think I'll be staying here long."

"Do you have any family?" I ask. "Anyone you can stay with? Do you have to keep moving around all the time?"

"I don't have to," he says. "I want to."

"Why do you want to?" I ask, leaning toward him.

He looks at me a minute, backs up. "There's nothing better to do. Make sense? I don't really know how else to explain it. I like moving around. Anyway, I should get going. Heading out of town soon. Tell everyone we're going. Thanks for the sandwiches."

“Sure, no problem. But how do you manage sleeping in the woods? It’s so wet lately. Aren’t you worried about getting sick?” I sound like one of the older teachers, like I’m trying to take care of him. He looks at me like I’m a fool.

“You can’t get sick from being out in the rain,” he says, and starts to move toward the door. “Your students will be back soon, won’t they?”

I look at the clock. They’ll be ready to come back to class in five minutes. “Yes,” I say.

“Well, like I said, thanks. George says thanks too.” He pats the dog’s head.

“Take care of yourself,” I say to the man. “Be careful.”

“You too,” he says, and leaves.

I watch him and George walking down the walkway, past the gym and the playground and into the woods. I’m surprised there are no cops around, but no one stops him. As I’m watching them walk away, my phone buzzes. It’s Rachel again. “I haven’t had a chance to look at anything yet,” I tell her. “I’m a little tied up right now.”

She’s worried about the adjustment Anna will have to make changing schools mid-term, and asks if I’m sure I can handle taking care of her on my own. “Are you sure about this?” she asks. “What if she doesn’t like it there either?”

I tell her Anna will be fine, everything will be fine, great even. “She’ll love it here,” I say, “I’ll make sure she does. There’s nothing to worry about.” I’m already late getting the kids from lunch, so I hang up and get my umbrella and go back out into the rain.

The kids are even more irritable after lunch, petulant and sleepy from the greasy pizza and french fries, the sugary canned fruit and cookies they’ve just eaten. They

whisper to each other and look at the words on the board. Michael raises his hand and asks me what Providence means. I erase the board and tell him to look it up in the dictionary. I am supposed to teach them a science lesson and then bring them to the gym for recess, but after talking about deciduous trees and evergreens for five minutes, I decide to take them outside instead. The air will do us good. It is still raining, and the kids grumble about having to get their umbrellas and raincoats on again. They say they don't want to go outside, they would rather just go to the gym, even if it's boring. They're tired, and if they can't go out in the sun, they don't want to go out. "Why can't we just stay inside?" they whine, but I ignore them.

"You've wanted to go outside for days now," I say. "And now I'm going to bring you outside. Be grateful." They don't say anything, but they fold their arms over their chests and look sullen. They can tell I'm irritated. My phone buzzes. Rachel again, this time a text message. "No need to look into Sacred Heart. We're looking at another school in the City. A. says she'll be fine. Doesn't want to move. Thanks though. Talk to you soon." I look at the message for a few seconds, then erase it and look up at the kids.

"The tramp's still out there," I say, watching their faces for a reaction. "Maybe you'll see him." This perks them up a little, and they put their raingear on more quickly.

"Let's go find him," one of them says, and the rest agree. "Let's find his tent and sit in it."

Outside it is dark and thundering. The sky is greenish, and there are flashes of lightning now and again. The kids seem excited by the wind, by the thunder. They walk quickly, with purpose, like they know they have somewhere to be and have no time to waste. As we pass the other classrooms, the students look out the windows enviously. I

can see their faces pressed against the glass, their eyes sleepy and desperate, their mouths open like they are calling to us. They want to be out here with us, want to be walking through the rain. Some tap on the glass, some even hit it with their fists, but we don't stop. The teachers look out the window too. They recognize me and wave, and I smile and wave back. We walk and keep walking, though some of the teachers call to us, ask us what we're doing. A couple even try to follow us, but we are too fast for them. They open their windows and shout at us, but we ignore them.

The kids and I walk in a line, single file, all through the school grounds, on the walkways and the grass, through the playground and into the woods, and we keep walking. I lead them. It is even darker in the woods, but the rain is cold on my face, and it wakes me up. The wind stirs my hair. I feel awake for the first time in weeks, in months. The kids seem more awake too. Each time it thunders or the sky lights up with lightning, they smile, and a couple even clap their hands. They stand up straight and walk with force.

THE GIFT

Edward was strange, but he was kind. He was always bringing us things—tomatoes and flowers from his garden, cheese he bought at the farmers' market, once a doll his wife had loved that he'd kept in the attic for years after she died. Early on we decided that he thought of us like his second family, like his children. We talked about him like that—in tones we thought of as compassionate. We knew he had two daughters, but we had never seen them.

When he gave Abby a puppy that had wandered into his yard, we weren't sure what to do. Our daughter loved animals of all kinds—dogs, cats, frogs and toads, snakes, whatever—she was even fascinated by bugs. She'd catch anything she could find and keep it in a jar until it died or she remembered to let it out. She usually remembered, but if she didn't and the thing died, she would be inconsolable until she caught something else. We liked that she cared about the natural world. We encouraged it. We built bug boxes and poked holes in jar lids and helped her gather grass to feed whatever she caught. We even let her keep the animals in her room, as long as she promised not to let them escape. But we had never discussed having a dog. We did things like that—held family meetings to discuss getting pets, or changing the furniture around in the living room, or trying a new restaurant. Abby had a say in the amount she got as an allowance and what time she had to go to bed. We liked that our house was a democracy. But we always talked about it first. That's the way the house was run.

Abby beat us to the door, and there was Edward, holding out a tiny, dirty ball of fur. Abby clutched at it and squealed. Her face was bright pink, and she was beginning to sweat. She had always been excitable. The doctor had said her system was weaker than

normal—nothing to be concerned about, he assured us, but we should be careful not to let her strain herself. He said she would get stronger as she got older. We stroked her hair and told her to calm down.

“I hope it’s all right,” Edward said, “he’s been hanging around my house for a couple of days now, and I know how much Abby likes animals.” There was a grocery bag at his feet. “I brought over a couple of bowls for his food and water, and some chew toys. I thought you all might like them. He’s a sweet little dog—just needs a bath and a flea dip. I think there’s even a flea collar in that bag.”

“I’m going to name him Junebug,” Abby said.

“We’re not sure what to say,” we told Edward. “We’ve never had a dog before.” We looked at each other and shrugged. “We wouldn’t even know what to do.”

“It’s easy,” Edward said, “just feed them and take them for walks, and they love you forever. I’ve had dozens of dogs in my life, and that’s really all there is to it.”

Abby brought the puppy into the kitchen to give it a bath in the sink, and we invited Edward in for a cup of coffee. We felt violated somehow, like he had betrayed us.

“If you really don’t want him,” he whispered when he sat down at the table, “I can bring him to the pound.”

“It’s okay,” we told him. “It will be fine.”

After the puppy’s bath, Abby spent an hour drying and brushing its fur.

“He looks like a cocker spaniel,” Edward said, “probably a mix. He might even have some Corgi in him.” We nodded and smiled, said he must know a lot about dogs. We made an appointment to bring the puppy for shots. Edward came over every day for two weeks with treats and toys, articles on pet care that he’d clipped out of magazines, a

worn leather leash and collar that had belonged to the last dog he'd owned. The puppy whined at night and had accidents on the floor. We cleaned them up. Some nights we stayed up and talked about giving him away. We could get Abby another pet—a cat, maybe, or something small like a guinea pig. Having a puppy was just too much, we thought. We were tired. Abby loved the puppy. We could barely get her to go to school in the mornings because she didn't want to leave him. She took him for walks around the neighborhood and fed him treats whenever he went to the bathroom outside. We knew she would be crushed if we told her we thought we should get rid of him, so we didn't say anything. But we thought about how we could do it without causing too much of a fuss. We could never think of anything, and after a while we decided to just be tolerant for Abby's sake.

Edward sat on the porch with us in the evenings and watched Abby and Junebug play in the yard. Abby threw a bright yellow ball, and Junebug ran after it.

“He's fitting in just fine,” Edward said. “He's a sweet little dog, just like I said. And Abby really seems to love him.”

“She does,” we said, and looked at each other. Edward just smiled.

Junebug got bigger and was finally housetrained. We were grateful, and sometimes we would take him for walks when Abby didn't have time or forgot to do it. We fed him in the morning before work, though Abby usually remembered to do it after school. We put a fence up so we could keep him in the backyard, and bought a doghouse. When it was warm, we left him outside at night. Sometimes he whimpered, but most of the time he was quiet. Edward came over often and brought dog biscuits he'd bought on sale and chew toys made from pigs' ears. “They look kind of nasty,” he said, “but dogs

love them.” Junebug chewed on one for a few minutes and hid it behind one of the cushions on the couch. We found it later when we sat down to watch television. It was cold and sticky, and we threw it and the rest of the package away.

After a while, Junebug started staying outside most the time. He didn’t seem to mind, though sometimes he dug under the fence and escaped. We would have to go out looking for him, and more often than not, we would find him at Edward’s house, rolling around in the grass while Edward rubbed his belly.

“I was just getting ready to bring him home,” Edward would say.

“We should just let you keep him,” we’d tell him. “He seems to like you best.” But whenever Abby heard us say this, she would cry and sob that Junebug was *her* dog. “How can you even talk about giving him away?” She would say, and she’d pick him up and carry him to the car, her face buried in his fur. She would always swear she would never let him get out again. “At my age I don’t need a dog,” Edward would say. “I’ve had my share. But it’s nice to get to see him when he roams the neighborhood. You’ve got to be careful, though—people drive like maniacs, and we don’t want him to get hit by a car.”

“No,” we said, “of course not.”

We tried to talk to Abby. “It’s not fair to leave Junebug outside all the time,” we’d say, and “he’s probably lonely out there.” If we mentioned finding a new home for him, she would cry and promise to be better. “You can’t give him away,” she would say, and usually she started to sob. She would bring him inside and play with him for a few days, but it never lasted. She was busy with school, we told ourselves, she had a lot of responsibilities. She was growing up. We knew we couldn’t expect her to chase after the

dog constantly like she had done when Edward had first brought him to us. Sometimes after she went to bed we would call Junebug inside, but after a few minutes he just wanted to be let out again. He sniffed our hands and turned away from us, wouldn't take any treats when we offered them. When we locked up the house and got ready for bed at night, we would look out the back door and there he would be, sitting next to his doghouse or pacing the yard.

One morning when we went out to feed him, Junebug wasn't there. There was a hole where he had dug under the fence. We were running late. We told Abby he would be okay for the day—Edward would keep him for us until we got home and were able to pick him up. She said she would worry about him all day, but we didn't think she was that concerned. She did her homework in the car on the way to school and barely spoke. We dropped her off and went to work. It was a normal day—we didn't even think about the dog.

He wasn't at Edward's house when we went to get him, and Edward said he hadn't seen him at all that day. "I'm sure he'll be back home by now," he said. "He's probably waiting out in the front yard for you all to get home." But he wasn't there. Abby walked around the neighborhood looking for him, and after dinner the three of us took the car to search, but we couldn't find him anywhere.

"It's all my fault," Abby said on the way home. Her face was flushed.

"Of course it isn't," we said.

We looked for Junebug for almost two weeks. Abby went out before school every morning and looked for him up and down our street. At night she couldn't sleep, and we let her miss school. It was almost summer vacation anyway, and she was a good student.

In the evenings the three of us drove around all of the neighborhoods within ten miles of where we lived, calling for Junebug and stopping at houses to ask if anyone had seen him. We called the animal shelter to see if he had been brought in. We found photographs of Junebug—one we had taken on Abby’s birthday with Junebug in a purple and gold party hat, another of him perched on Abby’s stomach as she lay on a float in the pool. There was Junebug as a puppy sitting on Edward’s lap, and Junebug after we had gotten him groomed, with a puffball at the end of his tail. We hadn’t realized how many photographs we had taken of him. There were dozens. We made fliers using some of the most recent ones, and then put all of them in a shoebox that we labeled “Junebug.” Abby brought it into her room and put it on her bookshelf. Edward came by nearly every day to see if Junebug had been found and to encourage us to keep looking for him.

“I had a dog named Cricket when I’d just gotten married,” he told us, “she was a little dachshund with one green eye and one blue eye and freckles, little brown spots all over her, the strangest looking dog you’ve ever seen. She followed my wife around everywhere, even into the bathroom. Linda loved that dog. One day Cricket got out of the yard—to this day I still don’t know how she did it—and was gone for over a month. It must have been almost two. We put up fliers and called all of the animal shelters, and went out every day looking for her. My wife cried herself to sleep every night over it. After a while, we gave up. We thought someone must have taken her, or maybe she’d gone off into the woods and died, we didn’t know. We were sure she wasn’t coming back. Well, we were pulling into the driveway one day, and there she was in the yard. One of her ears was all torn up and needed stitches, and she looked like she had been rolling in mud for days, but it was Cricket. We got her cleaned up and brought her to the

vet, and she never took off like that again. She wouldn't even go outside unless one of us was with her. We had her for almost twelve years before she died of old age." When he was finished, he sat back and smiled at us. "See?" he said, "you can just never tell with dogs. I bet Junebug will come back any day now."

Edward was the one who found Junebug, three days after he told us the story about Cricket. It was late evening and we had finished dinner. We had just put the dishes in the dishwasher and were cleaning up the kitchen. Abby saw him coming down the walkway toward the front door holding something wrapped in a blanket. "Junebug!" she shrieked, and ran to the door.

"I'm so sorry to have to bring him to you like this," Edward said when we opened the door. "I think he must have been hit by a car. We should get him to a vet right away."

"He's alive, then?" we asked, and watched as Abby touched the blanket gently.

Edward nodded. "He's not doing too well, though. I found him in my front yard when I came back from my after-dinner walk."

Edward sat in the backseat with Abby and held Junebug all the way to the vet's. We were the only ones in the office, and the vet allowed all of us to go into the examining room with Junebug. Edward wanted to sit in the waiting room, but we told him to come with us. "We're sure Junebug wants you there," we said. "He went to your house, after all."

Edward frowned a little. "I think maybe Abby and I should stay out here," he said. "I'll buy her a Coke or something. There's no reason for all of us to go back there."

"I'm going back there," Abby said.

"Please, Edward," we said, and he stared at us.

“All right,” he finally said, and followed us into the examining room.

Junebug’s back was broken. The vet said he must have dragged himself into Edward’s yard, and that he’d probably never be able to walk properly again.

“What should we do?” we asked.

“The best thing to do would be to put him to sleep,” she said. “It’s the most humane thing when they’re like this.”

Abby was silent, though her lips and hands were shaking. She was pale, and there were red splotches in the middle of her cheeks.

“There’s no way he’ll get better?” we asked, “No way he could walk again?”

“Anything’s possible, I suppose,” the vet said. “I’ve seen it happen before. But it’s not likely. And he’s suffering right now. I’m not sure there’s anything we can do to help him.”

Junebug’s front paws twitched, and he panted. His eyes were closed, and every time the vet touched him, he made a small, quiet yelping sound. We could see the twist in his spine, the way his back legs drooped. “Sometimes it’s best just to let them go,” Edward said, and squeezed Abby’s shoulder.

Abby shrugged away from him and came up to the examining table. She put her hand on Junebug’s chest. “His heartbeat’s really slow,” she said, looking at the vet, and then at us.

“He’s probably going into shock,” the vet said and listened to his breathing. She turned on the faucet next to the examining table and ran water over Junebug’s feet.

“Warm water sometimes brings them back from it,” she said. We watched as she

continued to run the water over Junebug's feet and legs. Steam began to rise up from the examining table.

"The water's too hot," Abby said, trying to reach over the vet and turn the faucet, "you're burning him."

"It's okay," the vet said, but she turned the water off. "What do you want to do?" she asked us, gently stroking one of Junebug's front legs. "If he's going into shock, he doesn't have much time anyway."

We looked at Abby, and then at Edward, who nodded at us.

"Okay," we said, and the vet gave Junebug the shot.

Abby refused to let Edward hold Junebug on the way home. The vet's assistant had put him in a cardboard coffin with his name written on it in heavy black magic marker, and she held it awkwardly on her lap and cried. It was getting dark when we got back, so we put him in the garage until we could bury him in the morning. "I'm so sorry," Edward said as he turned to go back to his house, but we didn't say anything.

We sent Abby to bed, and sat up with her. "I want to have a funeral for him," she said, and we agreed.

"We'll do it tomorrow when we bury him," we said. She finally fell asleep, and we wiped her face with a cool cloth, wiping away the streaks the tears had made. She was feverish, and we wanted her to get a good night's sleep. We cleaned her hands and pulled the blankets up to her chest, then went downstairs and made a pot of tea.

The next morning was sunny and warm, and we thought we should bury Junebug before it got too late. We went upstairs to wake Abby up, and she was sitting up in bed holding a pillow to her chest. "I don't feel well," she said. "My chest hurts and I think

I'm going to throw up." We brought her to the bathroom, but she didn't throw up. Her body was hot, and she was sweating. She sat on the floor while we rubbed her back and gave her a glass of water, and then we took her back to bed. "You can't bury Junebug until I'm better," she said, and we promised we wouldn't.

We took her to the doctor that afternoon, and he said she needed to rest for a few days. "She's been under a lot of stress for the last few weeks," he said after we told him what had happened, "especially the last couple of days. You have to remember that she's not as strong as most children her age."

"But she's going to be all right," we said.

"She'll be fine if she's able to rest," he said, "but she could get sicker if she's not kept calm."

We brought the television into Abby's room when we got home and watched Disney movies with her until she fell asleep. It was dinnertime, and we cooked a frozen pizza and ate it at the kitchen table—it tasted stale and we didn't finish it. We sat at the table and didn't know what to do. We decided to visit Edward, and went to check on Abby before we left. She was sleeping, breathing slowly and evenly, and we kissed her forehead and whispered that we would be back soon. She didn't move. We closed her door and went downstairs, then into the garage. Junebug's cardboard coffin sat on top of the washing machine. We picked it up, and it was heavier than we expected. We put it back down on the washing machine and tried to lift the lid. The vet's assistant had taped the box shut, so we used our house key to tear the tape. Junebug was in a white garbage bag that was tied at the top in a large knot. We undid the knot and opened the bag, and looked down at him. His mouth was open slightly, and the tip of his tongue stuck out

between his front teeth. His eyes were closed. There was still tape around his right front leg where the vet had given him an IV, and we gently unraveled it and threw it away. We lifted Junebug out of the plastic bag and folded it like a blanket and placed it underneath him in the box. We cleaned the corners of his eyes and around his ears. His fur was matted and dirty, so we went back into the house for his brush, and stood and brushed him until he was soft and shiny and there was no trace of dirt. We put our faces down into his fur, and it smelled like the vet's office. We ran our hands over his back, pressing into the broken spine, and down his legs, both back and front.

When we were finished, we put the lid back on the coffin and taped it shut again. We went into the house and gathered all of Junebug's toys and his water and food bowls and the half-empty box of dog biscuits we kept in the pantry. We put them in a plastic grocery bag, and put the brush on top. Back in the garage, we placed the bag on top of the cardboard coffin. We each took an end of the box and carried it out of the garage and down our walkway onto the sidewalk, careful not to let the grocery bag fall off. Edward was sitting on his front porch reading a newspaper and drinking iced tea when we reached his house, and we were almost standing directly in front of him before he noticed us. He put the newspaper down on his lap and looked at us.

“What have you got there?” he asked. We set the box down in front of his chair and took the plastic bag off of it.

“Here are Junebug's toys and some dog biscuits, and food and water bowls,” we said, opening the bag and taking all of the items out and placing them around the cardboard coffin, “and we brought over his brush, too, though he shouldn't need it again

for a while. We just spent almost an hour brushing him. If we find anything else at home, we'll be sure to bring it to you."

Edward twisted the edge of the newspaper between his fingers and stared at us.

"And what's in the box? Is that Junebug?"

"Yes," we said, "See, here's his name on the front."

"Why did you bring him here?" Edward asked, and his voice shook.

"Abby wanted to have a funeral for him," we said, "but she's sick. She's been under a lot of stress lately. So we weren't sure what to do with him. We couldn't just leave him in the garage. And then the more we thought about it, we realized that really, he was your dog anyway. He came to you in the first place when he was just a little puppy, and he came to you every time he got out of our yard. He even found his way back to you after he'd been hit by the car. He's more your dog than ours—he always was."

"But what am I supposed to do with him?" Edward asked, looking at the box and then at us, "What do you want me to do?"

"He's yours," we said, "keep him." And we turned around to walk back home.

THE DISAPPEARING CHILDREN

The children are disappearing. Every week there's at least one fewer, and when we ask those who remain where their classmates are, they just look at us with blank faces. The bolder ones say they don't know who we're talking about, there has never been a student by the name of Marcie or Ben or Erik. "But look," we tell them, holding up a drawing or a pencil case with Marcie's name on it, "of course she's been here. And there's Ben's workbook. It was in his desk—he sits right in front of you, Cara. Don't you remember how he drew stars all over his workbook and got in trouble? Look at all the stars. Now what do you have to say about that?" They shake their heads and go back to their work. "Don't you remember?" we ask them. "Do you think we've always had so many empty desks in the room?" We call Ben's parents, and the person who answers the phone is unfamiliar, says she doesn't have a son named Ben. When we call again, a man answers and tells us to stop calling. We try a third time, and no one's home. We've called the parents of all the children who are missing, but they're gone. It's like they never existed, though we know they do. They must. We have proof—their children's drawings and stories and books are still here. We've put them away in the supply closet, but we take them out and look at them every day.

We are trying to understand what's happening. We hold faculty meetings to discuss the problem and compare numbers. Ms. Dickson lost three last week, and one again yesterday. Ms. Stafford has only ten students left. Pretty soon, she says, she'll be able to stay home in her PJs all day. "We'll all be able to skip lunch duty," she says. She laughs nervously, and everyone laughs with her. We don't know what to do, but we have to do something before they're all gone. We have even considered going to the houses

where the missing children used to live, knocking on the doors until someone answers and tells us what is happening. We have driven by them many times and there are never any lights on. The grass in the yards is long and thick, and we've never seen any signs of anyone moving around inside. At one house, we saw a gray cat sitting in the driveway, but it was gone the next time we drove by and we haven't seen it again.

The principal is no help. He says he's doing all he can, but without cooperation from the parents there's nothing we can do. He says he's called the truancy office, but no one will return his calls. He's called the police, but they told him to call the truancy office. "My hands are tied," he says. We no longer ask him to do anything, but whenever he sees one of us, he says he's done all he can, we can't expect him to do any more. We tell him it isn't his fault, we know, but he just shakes his head. His eyes are always red, and he looks desperate. It has been weeks now since our students started disappearing, and the principal has given up. We worry that he might be losing his mind. At the last faculty meeting, he put his head on his arms and started crying, then fell asleep. We turned the lights out and left him there.

We don't have lessons like we used to. Instead, we talk to the students about the missing, try to jog their memories. "Bethany loves dolphins," we tell them, and hold up the picture Bethany drew of herself swimming in the ocean and holding onto a dolphin's fin. "Erik always wears homemade sweaters and hats. His grandmother makes them for him every Christmas." They look at us like we're crazy, like we're liars. They doodle in their books and ignore us. "Look," we say, "something is seriously wrong here. We need to find out what's going on." But they ask us about their long division homework or the

essay they're writing about the event in history they find most interesting. The essays are overdue, but the students were asked to write them before the others started going missing and we don't think we should be concerned about such things now. But the children are very concerned. They talk to us like we've forgotten something very important, like we are neglectful. They chastise us and tell us we need to do our jobs.

"Talk to us about the Gettysburg address," they say, "the bombing of Pearl Harbor. We want to learn about history, about science. Aren't you going to grade our homework? Why are you still here if you're not going to teach us something?" We shake our heads at them, watch them for any signs of knowing something they refuse to show. Every time one of them takes a breath or moves in his seat, we think he is going to say something. This time, we think, they are going to tell us what they know. They reveal nothing.

"Aren't we supposed to be doing math now?" Michael finally asks when the clock reaches 10:30, and the rest nod and take out their math workbooks. We watch them adding and subtracting, making dark marks on the heavy sheets of paper and erasing errors. They look smug, closed up. They are impenetrable. We watch as Michael talks with them about the math problems and how to solve them, and we don't interfere.

All schools have problems, we know this, and we try to stay calm. There are always students with attendance issues or family problems, poor test scores and sickness, and once we thought we would have to stop offering music classes because we weren't getting enough funding. Money is always an issue. Our school has dealt with a lot of things, and we have survived. But attendance problems and lack of money are the types

of things you expect when you work at an elementary school. These things are solvable, or if they are unsolvable, at least they are familiar. But we have no help, no one to give us a plan of action, an outline to follow that makes sense. We get to school every morning, all of us arriving by 7:30, and we wait to see which students will be missing. Will it be Laura, who is so quiet she's practically invisible, or Robert, who scratches at his hands until they're raw, whose parents haven't taken him to the doctor even though we have sent him home with a letter a week for the last two months? We take roll, and are almost disappointed when there isn't another one gone. It's the worst when one of them comes in late—we sit at our desks holding our breath until the child shuffles in looking embarrassed, or more often these days, nonchalant. Some of them have started to tease us—more and more often they come in late, after the bell has rung and we have noticed them missing, but before we call roll and count them absent or tardy. We think they wait outside the door until just the right time, but we haven't been able to catch them at it yet.

We try to remain patient. They are children after all, and we have to keep our composure. We meet in the hall and complain that they just don't understand the seriousness of what is happening. We tell ourselves they are too young to understand it. If they could understand it they would be terrified. They would do everything they could to help us. They don't mean to dismiss our concerns; they just don't know any better. Inside, though, we want to slap them, to hold their shoulders and shake them until they talk to us, until they take the missing children as seriously as we do.

Laura is gone, and Sam, and Angela and Sara from the fifth grade. We have gone to their houses. When we didn't see any lights on at Laura's house, we went over to talk

to her neighbors. “We’re so sorry to interrupt you,” we said as politely as we could when they answered the door. They were an older couple, already in their bathrobes though it was only 5:30. We smelled meatloaf and cabbage coming from the house, and we knew they were in the middle of dinner. They looked at us like they thought we were selling something, like at any minute they were going to ask us to leave. “We won’t take much of your time. But this is very important. We hope you can help us.” They nodded slightly. “Can you tell us where Laura is?”

“Laura?” the woman asked, and immediately after she spoke the man said “We don’t know anyone named Laura.”

“She lives next door,” we said. “Or at least she used to. She’s one of our students, and she’s gone missing. We teach at Hamlin Elementary. Laura just stopped coming to school. We haven’t seen her since last week.”

“Maybe she’s sick,” the woman said. “A lot of people have gotten the flu lately.” The man looked at her and nodded, and then back at us.

“She isn’t sick,” we said. “That isn’t possible. She lives next door, but it doesn’t look like anyone lives there. It isn’t just Laura. It’s Sam and Molly and Ben and Marcie and Angela. It’s Sophie and Felicia and Anton. We’ve lost so many already, and it’s not just the flu. It can’t be just the flu.” The man and woman stared at us, and the woman tied her bathrobe tighter around her small waist. “Could you just think for a minute? Maybe you’ve seen her. She’s got long red hair and freckles. She’s ten, but she could pass for seven or eight. She’s very small. And very quiet.”

“No one named Laura lives next door,” the woman said, shaking her head. “We’ve never seen a little girl like that.”

When the man shut the door on us, we went to Laura's house and looked in the windows. The house was empty, but we knocked on the door anyway. We knocked until the people across the street turned on their porch light and looked outside, and then we left.

Sam's house wasn't empty, but Sam wasn't there and no one who had heard of him. "The secretary must have put the wrong addresses on all the students' records," we said, but we knew that didn't make sense. Every address couldn't be the wrong one. But it was that way with all of them, and so finally we gave up and went home. After this, many of us stopped coming to school as well. At first, teachers called in sick, but after a while, they just stopped showing up. Those of us who continued to come in would call them, and they would say it was pointless. "What does it matter when there are so few students left to teach?" they'd say, and we told them that of course it mattered.

"What matters most," we'd say, "is that we keep everything ready for them when they come back. We want them to come back and have everything be the same as it was when they left. We want them to feel welcome, like they're coming home." They would argue with us, tell us the children weren't coming back, they were gone, and then we would hang up the phone. After a few days, some of the teachers who had left came back, embarrassed, saying they'd been wrong, but some of them didn't.

The students who are left behave horribly. They make noise while we call the roll, and some of them don't even sit at their desks at all. They sprawl on the floor and make messes with glue and construction paper and scissors. Some of them have started drawing pictures on the walls. We watch them, and we can't help but imagine we're looking at

animals, at a group of highly developed dogs or apes. They no longer listen to anything we say, and talk only to one another. We imagine them chattering to one another in their primitive language, grooming each other until a fight erupts, then screeching and biting at one another. They are only children, we remind ourselves—even the most powerful, the most violent, are children. They are under stress. They need discipline and structure. So we try to soothe them. We talk to them in quiet voices. We tell them we know they are going through a tough time right now, but their behavior is unacceptable. “You must be quiet,” we say softly, trying to force them to listen to us, to be quiet so they can hear. “You’ll help everyone if you’re quiet and calm, if you pay attention.” But they ignore us completely, and so we become stern. We speak sharply, clapping our hands to get their attention. Though we feel guilty saying it, we tell them to shut up. We tell them that when things get back to normal they will be in deep trouble, there will be consequences, but they shrug and look at us as if to say, “Aren’t things normal now?”

There are no good students left. The ones who remain are the ones who have always given us trouble. They’re the ones who have been in danger of failing or have had disciplinary problems, the ones whose parents we’ve had to send letters home to time and again. We wonder if there is a connection between their not going away and their being problem children, and we think there must be. Those of us who still come in every day to teach talk about this. There aren’t many of us left anymore either, and the ones who no longer come to work refuse to talk to us. They tell us there is nothing we can do to convince them to come back, and so we no longer try. We congratulate ourselves on being the ones to stand by our children and our school. The principal tells us daily that he is going to shut down the school, but we tell him everything will be fine. We ask him to

wait just a little longer. We can take care of things without the teachers who have quit. We bring their students into our classrooms and they don't even seem to notice anything is different. Sometimes we wonder if the principal is right, if shutting the school down really is the best idea, but we try not to think about it.

The children who remain have divided themselves into leaders and followers. The leaders, like Michael, tell the followers what to do, and they do it. At first, the followers would look up at us, questioning, before they made a move. We would tell them not to listen to their classmates but instead follow our directions, and they would. Sometimes they had to be prompted more than once, but at first they listened. The leaders would get frustrated and would threaten the followers, but we had enough control that the followers would listen to us when we told them not to give in to the threats. Now, though, they only do what Michael and the other leaders say. When they look at us now, it is to roll their eyes or smile wide and show their teeth. The children who remain are not intimidated by each other anymore, and nothing we say or do intimidates them.

It has been almost a month since the last one disappeared, and we have decided that these who are still here are the students who will remain until the others come back. These are the ones who probably wanted to go, who were jealous of the others when they left, and so we think it's fitting that they are the ones to stay behind. And now that the others have all gone, these children seem to enjoy it here. We're even pretty sure that some of them have begun spending the night in the classrooms. Lately, when we arrive—still promptly before 7:30—we will come into our rooms to find some of them asleep, curled in balls on the floor with their backs against each other. When we turn on the

lights, they wake up and shake off the sleep, and look at us warily. They seem comfortable here, and so we try not to disturb them. We've brought in blankets, and each day we bring food for them—fruits and vegetables, sandwiches, whatever we have in our houses that is healthy and seems like something they would like. We no longer ask them about the others, because it seems to agitate them. We have decided that it is probably best to leave them alone. In fact, we have given them the classrooms as their own for the time being and we spend most of our time at school in the hallways or the teachers' lounge talking. The students who remain have shown they can take care of themselves, and so we let them be. Sometimes we hear yells coming from the classrooms, screams, and we poke our heads in, but we usually can't see anything. They like to keep the rooms dark now, and so we stay in the parts of the building that are well lit. Most days we don't go in the classrooms at all, and when we do, it is just to get something from our desks, which we are grateful the students leave alone. We haven't seen the principal in a few days, but we think he will come back once the missing children do. He needs a break, we say, but we'll see him soon.

When the others come back, we say, then things will be different. There will be order. The students who have remained will be reprimanded, and will perhaps be sent to other schools to get the discipline they need. The principal will visit each classroom every day like he used to, and we will show off our students' work—the stories and drawings and dioramas they'll create with our help, the math problems successfully solved on the board. We will bring the janitors back and have them give the school a deep cleaning, and we will start again. The classrooms will be bright again, perhaps even repainted in shades of yellow and green. They will be comfortable rooms in which the

students can learn and we can enjoy teaching. The children will have lessons to catch up on and essays to write, and we will do our best to make everything perfect so they can begin again after such a long time away.