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## Marriage and Other Trouble

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MARRIAGE AND OTHER TROUBLE

by

BENJAMIN BUCKINGHAM  
BA, University of Central Florida, 2014

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## ABSTRACT

*Marriage and Other Trouble* is a collection of (mostly) realist short stories. These stories explore the dynamics of marriage and family, ranging from characters dating in their twenties, to remarrying in their sixties. The characters in this collection grapple with adultery, sexual identity, addiction, class, privilege, and illness. I am interested in the lasting impact of events. Therefore, these stories often reflect on the history of relationships and on how the events of these characters' lives will carry into the future. Mostly set in Florida, place plays an important role in these stories, providing both structure and conflict. The one magical realist story I've included takes place in the afterlife. Addressing suicide and depression, this story explores the guilt over those left behind, and the continual struggle to reconcile with the past, even after death.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## REMODELING

Catherine is very DIY, so we're playing *The Newlywed Game*, which she made using instructions from the internet. We each get a 2x6 Dry Erase board and a black Dry Erase marker with a little dry eraser on its cap. All very cute.

It's after dinner, and we've moved into the living room. I'm sitting on the loveseat, next to my wife Nora, who is six months pregnant. Catherine and her husband Eric, who used to be my best friend, sit on the couch opposite. My younger brother Billy and his girlfriend, Sam, sit on chairs from the dining room. Billy and Sam have been living with Nora and me for the past month while they're in-between apartments.

It's the first time since Nora got pregnant last November that Catherine and Eric have invited us over. We're finishing our wine. Or, at least, three of us are. Billy and Sam are trying to stay clean, and that means staying sober, too. Obviously, Nora isn't drinking.

Catherine says, "I got all this stuff for eight bucks, and you just download the PowerPoint, with the questions, for free."

On the coffee table, Catherine's laptop is open to *The Newlywed Game* PowerPoint, the slide edged in frilly pink, pixelated lace. The living room has a Home Depot feel—concrete floors, plenty of exposed beams, and a scattering of power tools. The house smells like glue and paint. Catherine and Eric bought a fixer upper and that's exactly what they've been doing. They updated the kitchen, put in a bath, and converted the basement to a gym.

“Here’s how it works,” Catherine says. “I’ve got the questions. When it’s your turn, write your answer on the board.”

“All right,” I say, though, really, the last thing I want right now is to talk about my marriage while Catherine is in the room.

Billy looks nervous. His blonde curls come down to his blue eyes, red-rimmed from the methadone. He and Sam go to the clinic every afternoon and come home placid as angels.

Their addictions—heroin, but also smoking and drinking—are the reason they’re in between apartments. They’re always in between apartments, and jobs, and cars. They can stay in the guest room until the baby comes, but then they have to move out. They’re good together, though, and it makes me worried. They’re a threat in this *Newlywed Game*, and I want to win.

Catherine and Eric I’m not worried about. They’ve been married for, like, ten years, but their marriage is on the rocks. Catherine has had multiple affairs. I know, because I was one of them. But, the day after Nora told me she was pregnant, I broke it off. Eric knows, because I told him. Nora still doesn’t know, and Catherine doesn’t know Eric knows.

“First question,” Catherine says. She has a scorecard with each couple’s initials at the top, rows for points to be tallied. Her pen is poised above the first column.

“Other than your wedding day, which one day of your marriage would you like to live again? Why don’t Billy and Sam start,” Catherine says. They’re not technically married. I don’t think Billy will ever officially get married, and not because he doesn’t love Sam. It’d just be too much paperwork.

“My guess is that Sam said today. Because we were clean today,” Billy says. He tugs at a tuft of hair. His fingers are pale and skinny. He is gaunt at twenty-six, though he’s regained some of the weight he lost.

Once, back when he was using, I convinced him to go to a movie with me. I bought us popcorn, soda. We took our seats and, after a minute, Billy excused himself to the bathroom. He stayed in there so long I thought he must have been shooting up. When I went and checked the stalls, he was gone. I found out later that he had refunded his ticket for the cash and split. I stopped buying him things for Christmas, because I knew he’d just return them. I wanted to help, but unless I could pay the landlord directly, or make sure the money was going toward groceries, he wasn’t getting a cent from me.

Sam is good for him. In the scale of their world, she is “better” than he is. Recovery has been easier for her.

Sam’s dry erase board, when she flips it over, reads “Today.” Catherine marks down their points.

“Our turn,” I say. My guess is going to be that the day Nora found out she was pregnant is the day she’d like to live again. The day she told me, I had spent the afternoon with Catherine. I came home to find Nora sitting at the kitchen table. Part of me thought she was going to ask for a divorce. We had hardly spoken in months. We were like roommates who didn’t get along. Things turned around with the pregnancy. I quit seeing Catherine, and Nora and my relationship got better. Never as good as it once was, but better.

“It’d have to be the day my father died,” Nora says.

“Really?” I ask.

“Ted and I had been married for only a few weeks then. We were at the funeral parlor, picking out the casket, the flowers. I went outside, and my mother was there, crying. I put my hand on her back.” Nora is absorbed in this memory, looking ahead, but not at anything. She bites her thumbnail—the blue nail polish chipped—a nervous habit that returned with the pregnancy.

“Anyway, she said she hadn’t loved my father. They’d been married twenty-five years.” I glance over at Catherine. She’s wearing make up tonight. Not a lot, but enough that it shows. And the Chanel perfume, which she’s maybe used a tad too much of, keeps catching my nose. It’s an odd smell when it mixes with the fresh paint. I study how half the wall behind Eric and Catherine is painted dark blue, almost the color of Nora’s nail polish, and how the other half is painted burgundy. I wonder which one of them chose which color. I turn to Nora. Her eyes are wet.

“Why that day?” Eric asks. He unbuttons his cardigan—it is a bit warm in here—exposing the small gut that’s developed over the years. That and his hair, which fell out prematurely, are the only signs of his aging.

“Because I realized how much I love Ted,” Nora says. “It reminds me to be grateful.”

After a pause, Catherine says, “Our turn.”

Eric sips his wine, studies Catherine.

Eric says, “Other than our wedding day, I’d have to say Venice, day two of our honeymoon.” Catherine looks at him, but doesn’t flip over her board.

“That was a good day,” Catherine says.

“But that’s not it?” Eric asks. I can hear the frustration in his voice.

Catherine flips her board over. It reads “4<sup>th</sup> of July.”

“I forgot about Venice,” she says.

#

This past Fourth of July was the first time Catherine and I kissed. There was a party here, and Eric did a big fireworks show in the street. Nora and I were fighting at the time, so I went alone. I kept to myself at the party. I don’t really know why I went, except that, at that time, everything was a competition between us. We had made plans to go to the party, and if I went, then no matter what, I won. Nora refusing to go, and not going meant she won.

They were readying the fireworks, but I stayed inside. The kitchen was being renovated. The cabinets were without doors, the floor was raw concrete, and paint swatches covered the counter. I was nursing a beer and brooding when Catherine came in. She was drunk, surprised but happy to find me in the kitchen. She got a bottle of champagne from the fridge, a pack of plastic champagne glasses from the counter. A toast outside, I guessed.

The smell of gunpowder and BBQ was blown through the open windows. We talked. Well, mostly Catherine talked, and I listened, while also thinking about getting home to continue fighting with Nora.

Suddenly, Catherine said, *right?* I was supposed to answer.

“I think so,” I said.

She leaned in and we kissed. Until then, Nora was the only woman I had ever kissed.

I set my beer on the counter and pulled Catherine closer. I could feel, against my arm, the light pressure of the plastic champagne glasses, and the chill of the bottle. Our ease surprised me, her touch so tender that when the fireworks began, I jumped.

#

“Next question,” Catherine says. She advances the PowerPoint. “What was the first meal you ate after you slept together for the first time?”

Odd question. I feel like I know Catherine’s answer, too. This isn’t going to be a game between couples, but a rehashing of our affair. If she answers “Cajun Supreme” we might have to end this game early.

“Let’s start with Ted and Nora,” Catherine says.

#

I met Nora in college. We dated two months before we slept together. The night I was pretty sure it would happen, I cooked us a nice dinner. I gave my dorm mate twenty bucks to spend the night at the movies. Nora and I ate chicken, broccoli, and macaroni and cheese. I did something special to the chicken, some recipe that called for scallions. I hadn’t really cooked, so it was quite a production. In hindsight, of course, it was a pretty simple meal. But it tasted okay.

We ate in the dorm common room, watched a reality show, and talked about what we might do over the summer. Then we went back to my room. We were asleep by the time my roommate came home. We went to the dining hall the next morning and had breakfast, both of us

feeling happy and unsure and nervous. We were nineteen then. Hard to think it's been almost ten years.

#

"Cereal," I say. Nora flips her board over and it reads "breakfast."

"Does that count?" I ask Catherine.

"I don't know," she says. Catherine studies Nora's board.

"It's right," Nora says.

"Fine. I'll count it." Catherine marks down our points.

"Billy and Sam?" Catherine asks. I'm curious about this one. Billy is studying Sam, trying to figure out what she's written. I doubt he even remembers. Billy grins. His teeth have not fared well over the years.

"McDonalds," he says. Sam smiles. Her smile is not as bad as his. She flips her board over. It reads "McDonalds."

"Really?" Billy says, pleased with himself. "I was just guessing." Sam looks at the floor, a little embarrassed that their first meal was McDonalds.

#

There was a McDonalds right around the corner from the house Billy used to stay at. I'd go over once a month, stop at the McDonalds and get him a burger and fries. Sometimes he'd answer the door. If he didn't, I'd leave his food on the porch and hope he was the one who ate it, or, at least, that someone got to it before a stray dog did.

The days he let me in, we'd sit silently in his living room. Billy would smoke one cigarette after another. People came and went. I got the impression that Billy hardly knew any of them, each alike: beaten down, nervous and sick. The furniture was from the garbage somewhere and no one cleaned up, ever. Sometimes the McDonald's bag from my last visit would still be on the table. I questioned why Billy's life had spun off in this direction. He had not suffered any catastrophe, was not beaten or molested. He had just made one poor decision after another.

I met Sam for the first time at that house. She was the first person I'd spoken to there, aside from Billy. She was warm. After meeting Sam, Billy seemed livelier. Awake. It's hard to tell how much of Billy back then was high or tired, or just ashamed of who he had become, silent in fear of incriminating himself further. Sam was more full of life. I could tell that she had more recently dropped into this world that my brother had been stuck in for years.

Either she'd get Billy out of this shit, or I'd have to watch as her life was destroyed too. Would have to watch as she got that look in her eyes, the one after all her friends, and family, after everyone she knew had given up on her, or was about to. The look that comes after you've sold everything, after you've become the type of person to refund a fucking movie ticket when I would have given him the ten bucks if he'd just asked.

#

"Our turn," Catherine says, and looks at Eric. The question is where did you eat after the first time you had sex, and I'm praying for anything other than Cajun Supreme.

"Valentino's?" Eric says.

Judging by Catherine's face, this is the wrong answer. I take a drink of my wine.

“Well, where then?” he asks, getting frustrated. Her board reads what I’d hoped it wouldn’t.

#

I learned that Catherine’s work was on my way home—a small office on a busy street a few blocks from downtown. There was a hotel next door, and its bar was known as one of the better bars downtown. Catherine often had a drink there before heading home to Eric.

One thing about this hotel that’s also important: the bartender there had been given a key to one room. The room was never rented, and its purpose was that if a patron, one not staying in the hotel, got too drunk, the bartender could give them the key and tell them to go sleep it off. A patron had crashed while driving home, and sued, and this was the hotel’s answer. The cost of the room would be added to their tab, and they’d have to argue over that with management the next day.

But the room was always open in the late afternoon, and it was a known thing that the key could be procured if one was willing to tip a little bit extra. It began simply as us meeting for a drink on Fridays after work. I’d pull off on my way home and let the rush hour traffic die down. Even stopping for one drink with Catherine, I’d get home at six or six-thirty and Nora didn’t really care. We were giving each other the silent treatment at the time, a perpetual stalemate.

As the summer wore on, our weekly Friday drink turned into two. Then there was the key, the room.

We started skipping the drink beforehand. Friday from five to eight, there was nothing but us, the room, the city sounds through the open window, the starched sheets, the TV attached to the wall. It wasn't glamorous; the room did hold drunken people most nights. Holes punched in the walls had been patched, stains cleaned from the carpet. But it was a nice hotel. The room wasn't bad. The way I saw it, the sheets were clean, and so long as we didn't peek under at the mattress, things would be fine. That's how I remember that whole time: a clean sheet on a dirty mattress, an affair covering up two failing marriages.

Coming out of the hotel in the early evening, we'd walk across the street to Cajun Supreme, its red neon sign buzzing as we walked beneath it. Their shrimp was crisp and golden brown, the jambalaya spicy, and soda from the can had never tasted so good.

#

"We ate at Valentino's for the first time on our first anniversary, remember?" Catherine says.

"We went there before that," Eric says.

"I don't think so."

"I'm pretty sure."

"Maybe we should take a break," I say. "Have some dessert?" Catherine smiles.

"Sure," she says. She's getting what she wants.

Billy and Sam go out to smoke a cigarette. The rest of us go to the kitchen.

It's been fully remodeled: tile floors, stainless steel appliances, a marble-topped island—an angel food cake sits on a ceramic pedestal in its center.

“There’s Cool Whip,” Catherine says. Nora helps get small plates and spoons from the cupboard. Eric goes into the hall, where they keep their wine, and comes back empty handed.

“Let’s switch to beer,” he says.

“No switching,” I say, “Let’s stick with what we’ve got.”

“Well, we’re out of wine. So we either quit now, or I get the case of Stella from the fridge in the garage.”

“I don’t see why we should quit,” Catherine says, slicing into the cake. Eric gives her a look. He goes to the garage and comes back with a case of Stella. Billy and Sam come back in. I see Billy eyeing the beer, but I know I don’t have to remind him he can’t have any. It’s part of our agreement: no drugs, no drinking.

The angel food cake tastes store bought, the Cool Whip hydrogenated. The silence is unbearable. After dessert, we go back into the living room.

“The ladies’ round is almost over,” Catherine says. *Thank God.* We settle into our seats. Billy and Sam are slumped in their chairs. I feel a bit worn out myself. It dawns on me that we’re not going to have a guy’s round; it’s already almost eleven.

Question three is, simply, what is the best part of marriage? I wait until everyone is done writing.

“We’ll start,” I say. I say that the best part is that Nora and I are going to have a daughter together. That we’re both going to be part of this thing that we love more than ourselves. That we’re going to be together to watch our child grow up. Nora flips her sign, an arrow aimed at her stomach.

Billy gives some long, stuttering answer about accountability and being there for each other and honesty and eventually Sam just flips her board. It reads “Trust.” This seems like the same thing, and the points don’t really matter.

“Okay,” Eric says. “Best part of marriage.” Catherine holds her sign to her chest.

“I would have to say--”

I can tell Eric is really thinking on this one. They haven’t got one right yet.

“Spending the rest of our lives together,” he says. Catherine smiles and flips her board over. It reads “you.”

I told Catherine I had to stop seeing her when Nora got pregnant. We were keeping the kid. Nora wanted to and I wanted what Nora wanted. I had behaved badly. I knew that. I wanted to do better, was *going* to do better.

I met Catherine at the bar in the hotel and told her it was over. She was hurt, of course, and she cried. I was hurt, too. We had been meeting once a week for months, and it was about more than sex. We had feelings for each other. But Nora was my wife. Thinking of nothing else to say, I asked, stupidly, “What are you going to do?”

Catherine looked at me.

“What am I going to do? I’m going to finish my drink, and then I’m going go home and fuck my husband.”

Eric smiles at Catherine’s “you,” and they kiss.

“Can the game be over?” Billy asks, standing and stretching his legs as if he’s been riding in the car for hours.

“Sure,” Catherine says. She’s made her point.

“Did we win?” Sam asks.

“Yes,” Catherine says, “you won.”

Sam and Billy go outside to smoke another cigarette. Catherine goes to the kitchen and begins on the dishes. I help Nora up.

“Want to see the greenhouse?” Eric asks.

“Sure,” I say.

“I’m going to help Catherine with the dishes,” Nora says. I kiss her on the cheek.

I follow Eric outside, across the yard, past Billy and Sam smoking on the wooden picnic table. There’s a high fence around the property. The sky is starless. We go to the greenhouse. It’s two hundred square feet, fifteen feet tall. They inherited the greenhouse, but Eric has actually taken to gardening. He’s not bad at it.

The greenhouse smells of manure, fertilizer, and rubber. Black hoses snake through the dirt beds, dripping water into the dark soil. Mildew coats the glass walls and roof. The main planter holds lettuce, tomatoes and snap peas. Eric walks along.

“You and Nora seem happy,” he says. I walk the opposite side of the planter.

“We are,” I say. I pick up a squirt bottle, but don’t know what’s in it, and don’t know if I should spray the plants, so I just carry it.

“How are you and Catherine doing?” I ask. Billy and Sam’s voices carry from the yard, but they seem far away.

“She still doesn’t know that I know. I keep waiting for her to tell me. Does it bother her? Will it ever bother her so much that she comes clean? And what then? Do I yell? Do I say, *I know. I’ve known for six months.* I feel like, if she tells me, maybe we can begin to move past it. But she has to tell me. Then again, you haven’t told Nora.”

“And I’m not going to.”

I set the squirt bottle down.

“So, what? We just go on?” Eric says, his voice raising. He turns toward the front of the greenhouse.

“What else is there to do?” I ask.

“How about the honorable thing?”

“I passed honorable three exits ago. I got off at Save My Marriage, which runs parallel to Atonement. So if you need me—”

“Bullshit. Atonement? Three exits ago? Listen to yourself. Your whole life you’ve been cruising down Self Centered Parkway and now you’ve gotten off in Fantasy Land and expect the rest of us to keep on driving along like nothing happened.”

Eric picks up a fern, studies it. I’m thinking he’s going to freak and throw it, or smash it against the planter. But he doesn’t.

“Things get better,” I say.

“How? How do things get better? And what if they don’t? What if things are getting worse?”

“Well, I don’t know.”

“Yeah. You don’t know. I could fill this greenhouse with what you don’t know,”  
he says.

“Listen, I’m sorry. It’s messed up. But I don’t know what else to do.”

“Well, me neither,” Eric says. He hands me the fern.

“What do I do with this?” I ask.

“I don’t know. Put it in your yard, or something.” He leaves me in the greenhouse alone.

I wait a minute, then walk back to the house. Catherine has already changed into her pajamas.

“Where’s Nora?” I ask.

“She’s in the guestroom. I figured you’d like to stay here tonight. It’s a bit of a drive home, isn’t it?” I can see that she’s pulled the couch out for Billy and Sam, who are still outside smoking.

“That really isn’t necessary,” I say.

“I think you should stay,” Catherine says.

“I’m fine to drive,” I say, my voice a little louder than I’d like it to be.

“But that really isn’t *necessary*,” Catherine says, “when there’s a bed for you here.” She kisses Eric goodnight, and walks down the hall to their bedroom.

“Just stay,” Eric says.

He leaves me alone. I shut the lights off as I walk into the living room and take a seat on the couch. The whiteboards and markers are scattered on the coffee table. The A/C breathes and I look around, as if there’s something I’m supposed to be doing. I let my eyes adjust. I listen for Nora stirring, but can’t hear anything, listen for Eric and Catherine talking, but nothing. Billy

and Sam are still outside, talking, but I can't make out what they're saying. My eyes are tired. I go to the kitchen and fill a large glass with water from the sink. I do not turn on any lights. Billy and Sam sit on the picnic table's top across the lawn. I stand and drink and watch them.

Suddenly, there are arms around me, a body pressing against my back. I turn to find Catherine. She's looking at me, and despite the dark, I can see that she has been crying. She kisses me.

"Don't do that," I say.

"Don't do what?" she asks, and leans in to kiss me again. I hold her away.

"Stop," I say. She opens her mouth to speak, but then, the sliding glass door opens and Billy and Sam come in. They turn the light on. Catherine quickly wipes her eyes, takes a step away from me. The four of us stand in silence for a moment. Billy is looking at me.

"Well I'm going to bed," Sam says. She looks at Billy, and when he doesn't look at her, she leaves the kitchen.

"I just came in for a drink of water," I say. I look for the glass on the counter behind me as proof, but before I find it, Catherine says, "Me too," and that makes it worse. Billy smiles, faintly, and opens the fridge. The door opens towards us, so I have the chance to glare at Catherine while Billy is looking for something to drink.

She mouths, *Sorry*.

*Screw you*, I want to tell her.

When he shuts the fridge, Billy has a beer in his hand.

“Bottle opener?” he asks. He’s looking at me. I take the corkscrew from the drawer, and hand it to him. He pries off the beer’s top and takes a swig.

“Well, I’m going to bed,” Catherine says. “Goodnight.” She smiles at me, then at Billy, and is gone.

Billy sets the corkscrew on the counter, opens the sliding glass door, and walks outside. I take a beer from the fridge, pop its top, and follow him.

He’s sitting on the picnic table, smoking. I sit next to him.

“Cheers,” I say.

“Cheers,” he says. We sip our beers. I try to remember the last time we were just sitting together in a backyard drinking a beer, such an easy pleasure.

“What was the deal, in there?” he asks.

“It was nothing.” We sit in silence for a minute.

“Is it still going on?” he asks.

“Nothing’s going on.”

“Well, good,” he says, condescension in his voice. I look up at the starless sky, that offers no guidance, no distraction.

“You want another beer?” Billy asks.

I don’t want him to have another one, and don’t need another myself, but I’ve been challenged. Why do I always feel this way? Why am I always up against everyone else?

“Sure,” I say. Billy goes into the house, comes out with two more beers. He lights a cigarette on his way. This is him in his element—not sitting inside playing some game, but

outdoors, with a beer and cigarette. I take the beer from him and set it next to my other one. Billy takes a long drink.

“Take it easy,” I say. Already his eyes are glassy. He takes a drag from his cigarette, the smell pungent, sickly. Billy seems mad, but he can’t be. What would he be mad about? I feel like I have to defend myself. But I don’t. He’s living in my house. I keep quiet. Finally, Billy exhales through his nose.

“Sorry,” he says. “What you do is your business.” By accepting this apology I would also be acknowledging that I’ve done something wrong.

“I don’t know what you think you saw,” I say, feeling like I have moral ground of my own to stand on. I’m the one who’s supported him all these years. I’m the one who helps him out. I haven’t messed up my life with drugs, stolen from my family. I have half the mind to take the beer out of his hand. I shouldn’t have even ceded him that much.

“Right,” he says.

The sliding glass door opens behind us, and we both turn. Thankfully it’s Sam and not Nora. I’d hate to have woken her and I’d have to explain why Billy is drinking. Sam regards us sleepily, like our mother might have, when we were children and stayed up secretly to watch TV. We’re about twenty feet across the lawn and I can’t tell if Sam can see our bottles or not. She’d be just as pissed as Nora. She walks barefoot across the grass. Billy tries to slyly hand me his beer, which I take, but now I have three beers on the bench around me. I try to act casual.

“Billy?” Sam says, approaching.

“Yeah?”

“Are you coming to bed?” Sam stands in front of us now, looking us up and down. Billy takes a drag from his cigarette. She looks at the bottles around me.

“Most of these are empty,” I say. I’m not very convincing tonight. Sam looks at Billy and I can tell she can tell he’s been drinking. She gives me a look like I should know better.

“Well?” she asks.

“I’ll be right in,” Billy says. We watch Sam walk back to the house, open the sliding glass door, and go inside. I’m thinking Billy has stayed to finish his beer.

“We want to keep staying with you,” he says, “for a while.”

“Or else what?” I ask, thinking he’s blackmailing me.

“I didn’t mean it like that. It’s been good for us, is all,” he says. “Just think about it.”

“We’d better go to bed,” I say.

We stand and walk across the yard, leaving the half empty bottles on the table. We go inside without saying anything else, go our separate ways through the dark house.

I go to the guestroom, but pause outside the door where Nora is sleeping. My hand rests on the knob but I do not turn it. Why do I hesitate? Is it that I should go to Billy and say *yes, please, stay with us as long as you’d like, and Sam, too.*

Or, should I go to Eric and Catherine’s room, tell her that he knows, and tell them both, again, how sorry I am.

Or, is it simply that this is now how it’s going to be? That every night before I go to bed, I’ll think *tonight is the night I’ll tell her.* The feeling builds. I’ll tell her everything. I’ll ask for forgiveness, though I don’t deserve it. The feeling builds, and then it’s gone. I wait a little longer.

I wait until I feel steady enough to face my wife, if I have to, if she's awake, and then I'm opening the door, and then I'm stepping into the room.

## MILLION DOLLAR HOME

The cabin should have been kept up over the years. *Nicely kept up* was what went through Dustin's mind as he and Claire drove two hours into the Florida swamp, to the ramshackle home of Dustin's childhood. His brother, Desmond, should have been coming each year to maintain the place. Dustin pictured him sawing lumber for new porch steps, or applying a Phillips screwdriver to a bright, gold hinge. Dustin even considered that maybe the cabin would be in better condition than it had been when he was a child. But as Dustin's truck rumbled up the sandy road, the cabin came into view, and all of those thoughts faded.

The basics were the same: single-story, tin roof. But the shutters, which had once been white, were now slate gray. The skirt of latticework around the cabin's bottom was crusted with green algae.

"Well," Dustin said.

"This is it?" Claire asked. They had been dating for one year.

"This is it," Dustin said.

He noticed the carcass on the porch as he climbed out of the truck. He adjusted his bandana, and leaned down to tie one of his boots. The tan laces were like roundworms in the yellow sand.

"Wait here a minute," he said. The cabin was built on sloping ground. The first floor was flush in the back, but the front porch was raised, with a crawl space beneath it, stairs leading to an unsteady plateau. The raccoon carcass on the porch was little more than bones.

Fine black hair grew between its joints.

“Damn,” Dustin said, stepping onto the porch. He looked over his shoulder at Claire.

Leaning in closer, he saw that it wasn’t hair, but long, spiky mold that had grown in the joints of the coon. He kicked the carcass from the porch. Claire came up the stairs with their bags.

Dustin was surprised by how hot it was inside. The A/C was off, and the thermometer in the kitchen read ninety-seven degrees. There was dust on everything: the liquor cabinet, the couches, the coffee table.

“This is it?” Claire asked, as if maybe they’d wandered into the wrong place.

“Yep,” Dustin said. Claire lifted a rag from the floor, still stuck in the shape it dried in.

“Perfect,” she said.

#

For Claire, this week needed to be good. She and Dustin were fine. They were okay. They were not great. And now the cabin was not exactly how Dustin had described it. It was not *right* on the lake, and it had not been *kept up*, as Dustin said it would be. Instead, it looked like the last cabin on the lane, the one in movies where stuffed birds were mounted on the walls, human teeth hung in the living room, and a crying baby sat on the floor without purpose.

The inside was swamp chic: a rusty bear trap hanging on one wall, the license plates nailed to the rafters (Florida, Georgia, Alabama), the empty liquor bottles on the shelf above the wood stove. As Dustin opened all the windows, Claire sat the groceries on the counter. The thing was, if they didn’t have a good week, if they couldn’t enjoy being around each other, and grow

as a couple, Claire felt their relationship was over. That, perhaps, they were just too different to make this work.

Since beginning college she had slept with two girls, and one boy before Dustin. Sex was confusing—or no, not sex. Sex she understood. It was desire that was confusing—the coming and going of it—her seeming lack of control.

A NASCAR magnet held dominion over the front of the ancient, rusty fridge. Surprisingly, the fridge worked. A little box of baking soda sat on the lowest shelf of the door. Claire put the groceries into the fridge. She took a sponge and dish soap from the bag.

This place wasn't so bad. The floors were cheap linoleum, but once cleaned, they'd be all right. The counters were dirty but intact. The cupboards were actually a nice wood, their handles hand-carved. Below all the dirt, the grime, Claire could see that, at some point, this place had been a home.

The faucet sputtered and ran rusty for a while, but eventually cleared. Cranking the handle on the casement window, Claire loosed spiders from their webs, and watched as they crawled into the sink, or out the dusty window. Claire was certain there would have been fewer spiders in Savannah.

Claire's roommate, Irene, had suggested Savannah as the destination for this trip. Adorable, southern, red-haired Irene—was from Savannah, and described, in her thick southern accent, the beautiful fountains and parks of her hometown, the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist with its rib-vault ceiling. Claire could listen to Irene talk all day with that accent. What did that

even mean, rib-vault? She imagined a vaulted ceiling of bone. Then imagined her and Irene lying in bed, Irene above her, Claire pressing her lips to Irene's ivory stomach, to Irene's tender ribs.

Claire wet the sponge and wiped the counters.

#

Dustin had not visited the cabin in ten years, but he still knew the surrounding area well. This was where he grew up, catching catfish in the lake with his flimsy Wal-Mart fishing pole, sneaking a canoe out at night with his brother Desmond.

Their father drank, and many nights Dustin and Desmond had to run from the cabin, the dirt cold beneath their bare feet as their father hurled curses from the porch, a thrown beer bottle disappearing into the bushes behind them with an animal rustle.

Dustin and Desmond would go to the lake and push their canoe into the still water, wetting their legs up to the knee. Their paddles cut the lake's surface and struck its sandy bottom. It wasn't until they had made it to the center of the lake that they'd look back at the cabin, the porch light visible through the trees. Their father's shouting carried, along with the crisp *thwack* of a cabinet slamming.

The boys trolled for alligators to pass the time. The beam of their heavy steel flashlight panned the cattails, the saw grass. Victory was a pair of yellow eyes on the surface of the water. Victory was learning the difference between a frog's croak and the low, guttural growl of a gator.

When they came back to the cabin their father would be passed out on the couch. Dustin often thought of killing him. How easy it'd be to slip d-CON into his bottle of J&B. How it

would be over before their father knew what was happening. How Dustin could make it stop, but knew he'd never do it.

Part of why Dustin brought Claire to the cabin was because he had not told her any of this. If he was going to be with Claire, if she was going to love him, and love him for who he was, he felt she needed to know.

#

Claire took a break and sat on the couch in the living room. The window A/C unit had hardly begun to cool the place down. Magazines were stacked beneath the coffee table. They were cheap nudie mags, the one on top called *Trucker Hussies*.

“Taking a break?” Dustin asked.

“Look at these,” Claire said. The chubby brunette at the magazine’s centerfold sat naked on the hood of a semi, her legs spread, her hands supporting her breasts. Dustin walked around the couch and sat beside Claire. She held the magazine open to Dustin. As he blushed and looked away she said, “Oh, come on. It’s nothing you haven’t seen before.”

Claire brought her right leg up, behind Dustin, and arched her back, her chest out, the magazine held against her stomach. Dustin’s eyes moved from the woman in the magazine, to Claire—face in mock ecstasy—then back to the woman again.

“What?” Claire asked. Dustin stood and went to the cabinet against the wall.

“You like that?” he asked. What she didn’t like was his tone of voice. Claire knew that Dustin felt uncomfortable about her sexuality, that he was a bit homophobic. He’d grown up in a small town, sure, but the city she’d grown up in wasn’t much larger. Perhaps she escaped small-

town thinking because her father was a Unitarian minister, a church where it was no more shocking to be gay than it was to be atheist. She knew old people who were homophobic, but young people were supposed to be different. No one under twenty-five cared about gay or straight, but here was Dustin, someone who supposedly “loved” her, who made her feel guilty about her desires.

“I love *you*,” she said. “Why? You like this? Hmm?”

“I think that’s disgusting,” Dustin said. Claire closed the magazine and placed it facedown on the stack beneath the table. *Disgusting*. She had accidentally stumbled onto Dustin’s internet history one day while she was using his laptop. *Trucker Hussies* was nothing compared. But Claire wanted to have a nice evening, wanted to sit on the porch and talk, or maybe watch a movie on her laptop, so she dropped it.

#

The magazine was one thing, but what really made Dustin uncomfortable was a conversation he’d had with Claire a few weeks after they started dating. He had never been with a girl before, and, before they had sex for the first time, he asked Claire if she had ever been with anyone. She’d been with a guy before. Girls, too.

“How many guys?” Dustin asked.

“Just one,” she said.

“How many girls?”

“A few.”

“Less than five?” he asked.

“Less than five,” she said. The idea of Claire with another girl excited Dustin, at first. There was something crazy about it. He’d thought to himself, *people actually do that?*

Before he’d started college, Dustin had never met a homosexual. In Bithlo they just called them *fags*. A fag was a skinny guy in a tank top, his stomach showing, his haircut short and spiked with gel. He wanted to suck your dick, or, worse, he wanted you to suck his. Dustin had seen people like this, on the news, and everyone he knew thought it down right disgusting.

But when he went to college, the homosexuals blended in. They didn’t look different than anyone else, or act different from everyone else. They were friends with some of the same people as Dustin, and, before he knew it, Dustin was friends with some of them. Claire, also, was so unlike his idea of what a gay person was. Not that the idea of it still didn’t bother him.

The brief excitement that came with imagining Claire and another girl together quickly became dread. How could he compete with a girl, sexually? It was one thing to live up to the guy she had been with before—odds are he didn’t know what he was doing, either—but other girls, that seemed unfair.

“Should we eat?” Dustin asked.

“Sure,” Claire said. They moved to the kitchen. Claire was making pork chops with potatoes au gratin, a family recipe. She found an apron in the pantry—red with white lace—it had belonged to Dustin’s mother. She had washed the pots and pans that hung above the stove and they were in the drying rack now. She washed the potatoes and peeled them above one of the pots. The skins fell against its bottom with a wet whisper. Dustin went to the living room and

returned with a bottle from the cabinet. Scotch. He would tell Claire about his father after they had eaten, and a drink might help.

“You want some?” he asked.

“No, thank you,” she said.

Dustin gave Claire a *suit-yourself* shrug and took a glass from the cupboard. He poured the scotch into the glass without ice. He had never drunk scotch before. When he tasted it, it was much stronger than he thought it would be. It burned his throat. Its caramel color had tricked him. He thought it would be sweet.

But as Dustin sat the glass down on the counter, he felt suddenly bright. Here with Claire for a short time, he felt awake. Alive. He pulled Claire close and kissed her. His breath was hot, her lips were wet and tender.

“I’m hungry,” Claire said, pulling away. Dustin kept his hands where they were on her waist.

“And I’m not?” he said, sarcastically, only joking. Claire smiled. “I’m hungry, too,” he said, and let his hands fall, defeated.

By the time they sat down to eat, Dustin had finished his scotch and poured another. It was just to help a little bit. After dinner, then they’d sit on the back porch and he’d bring up his father. Maybe he’d tell about the fishing trip they took on the St. John’s when he and Desmond were kids: Desmond wandered into poison sumac and his legs broke out in a painful rash. Their father’s plan to “catch their dinner” backfired and he ended up trading a four pack of tallboys for some live crab off a couple fishermen in Mosquito Lagoon. Their father laughed all the way back

to camp at the two fishermen using fried chicken as bait. They were pulling crabs out of the water as fast as they could throw them in the cooler. *Only one type of man in this world would think to fish with fried chicken*, their father said. Their trip ended early.

#

Halfway through dinner, Claire knew Dustin was drunk. His eyes were watery, red. His face was gaunt as he reached slowly for a cigarette and fixed it between his lips. He had been talkative through dinner but now sat quietly smoking, a nasty habit.

“Are you okay?” she asked. Dustin didn’t answer, but ashed his cigarette onto his plate, bits of gristle still clinging to the bone. Claire saw through the glass table the way Dustin fidgeted with the frayed ends of his jeans. She took their empty plates to the kitchen and ran some water over them.

Dustin was unsteady on his feet as Claire led him to the couch to lie down. He eased back and closed his eyes. Claire rubbed his chest. He was mumbling something about fried chicken and fishermen. *There, there*, she said. When he asked for calamine lotion and hydrocodone cream, she went to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom but came back empty handed.

“What is it for?” She asked, “Why do you need it?” But Dustin was already asleep.

Claire made up the queen in the master bedroom with some sheets they had brought from home. She was worn out. She didn’t even have the energy to shower.

When she woke, it was still early and Dustin was snoring on the couch. Claire decided to go to the lake for a swim. She put on her swimsuit, shorts and a tank top over that, and left a note: *Went to the lake for a swim. Come join when you wake up. Claire*

She quietly slipped out the sliding glass door, and took the dirt trail from the porch, down through the trees, toward the lake. It was a beautiful morning: dew on the ground, spider webs built down in the grass, bird calls, and the cool of morning before the day began. If she tried hard enough she could trick herself into thinking fall was here, that maybe the whole day would be like this. It was the type of morning, her father would say, that was as good as church.

Claire was trying to be more open to the nature of things. Like a thicket of saw palms. What was a thicket of saw palms' purpose? They were hard to walk through, and they didn't look all that great. Too often, Claire saw things only in how they benefitted her. What was the purpose of a thicket of saw palms *to her*? In her life? When the reality was, saw palm thickets had been around, and would continue being around, and that not once did a saw palm thicket consider how it might be of use to a human being. At least, Claire didn't think it did. Perhaps the internal life of the saw palm thicket was of greater complexity than she imagined.

Things existed, and it seemed like the real work was not trying to figure out their value, but their beauty. How was the cabin beautiful? How was Dustin?

The trail lost its slope and followed the curve of the lake, a sandy path in the shadow of the trees. The lake's surface was flat and dark. A few docks jettied out from the shore, and a man and a woman were lying at the end of one of the docks, sunning. A motorboat was held to their dock with a sturdy rope.

Despite the docks, there were not any houses visible. The floating dock in the lake's center was an eight-by-eight square of wood supported by steel pontoons. Grass grew around the inside of the lake's perimeter. There wasn't much of a shore, no beach, just grass that went on up

into the pine trees, which dropped a layer of pine needles onto the sand. It was a peaceful and quiet place. An old metal canoe was up on shore, resting on the roots of a nearby tree.

Claire undressed down to her swimsuit and waded into the water. It was already hot, the sun beating down. The water was chilly, not on the surface, where the sun had already begun to heat it, but down deeper, where her toes dug into the sand. She waded up to her waist—enjoying the birds calling to one another from the trees, the sound of insects in the bushes—before diving in.

The water was cool all over her body. It was quiet below the surface, and she opened her eyes, and watched the muck and weeds swaying at the lake's bottom, awash in the brown-green light.

Claire surfaced, stood, and parted the wet strands of hair from her forehead. She shuddered as water trickled down her back. She dove again, and swam hard until she reached the floating dock. When her hand slapped wood, she was out of breath. She clung to its metal ladder, floating for a minute while she got her breath back. She climbed, the ladder's rungs ribbed with anti-slip tread, but coated in a layer of slick algae. Claire enjoyed the feeling of it against her feet.

She climbed out of the water and lay back to rest. Closer, now, she saw the couple across the lake were in their early thirties. The man wore colorful board shorts. His blonde hair came down over the sides of his black sunglasses. The woman's bikini was white, knit nylon hugging the contours of her body.

The man waved. Claire waved back.

The sun pulled the moisture off her skin. The dock's wood was warm and smooth. She closed her eyes. A little nap wouldn't hurt—with the water of the lake lightly lapping against the side of the dock. The birds' called from the woods. Her bathing suit was damp and cool.

Claire opened her eyes when the motor started. The man on the dock across the lake was behind the boat's steering console. He trolled smoothly toward Claire, who rose, aware of the man's eyes on her and wishing she had something to cover up with. She could submerge herself in the water, but that would only make their conversation awkward, Claire floating around in the wake of the boat, the man leaning over to speak to her. She stayed on the dock, hung her legs over the side, and leaned back in an approximation of casual.

"Hello," the man called, over the sound of the motor. He brought the boat closer to the dock. The boat's smooth fiberglass sides were white and flecked with silver flakes that caught in the sun as the boat rose and fell in the wake. The large motor had the word Johnson written across its side in gray block letters. It spit a steady stream of water down into the lake. He cut the motor. The dock bobbed up and down in the wake and Claire moved with it.

"Hi," Claire said.

"Chad Melwright," the man said.

"Claire."

"Hi, Claire."

"Hi, Chad."

"My wife and I are staying there." Chad turned and pointed to the trees.

“Well, you can’t actually see it from here,” he said, disappointed. “What brought you here?” Chad asked.

“My boyfriend and I are celebrating our anniversary. We’re staying in a cabin, over there,” Claire said, pointing toward their house, hidden by its own patch of trees. “We’re only here for a few days.”

“To be honest we’re a bit bored. Meg’s father bought the place. We came down from New York for the whole summer. There just isn’t much to do around here.”

Chad turned off the engine, climbed over the edge of the boat, down onto the dock next to Claire. His flip-flops were Rainbows, a good brand, his sunglasses Oakley’s. And yet, he looked like a child playing dress up. His watch, and swim suit, and shoes all too big for him. The boat, also, was large and unnecessary for the simple task of coming out to see Claire. Up close, Chad smelt of tanning oil.

“There doesn’t seem to be much to do around here,” Claire said. She was reflected in Chad’s sunglasses—her wet hair, the freckles blooming on her cheeks. She liked how she looked.

“There isn’t. So Megan and I were wondering if you might like to join us for dinner. You and...”

“Dustin,” Claire said.

“Dustin. Perfect.”

“Tonight?” Claire asked.

“Sure, tonight would be great,” Chad said. “Eight o’ clock?”

“Sure,” Claire said. “Will we see your house from the road?”

Chad smiled. “You’ll see it,” he said, and looked at Claire until she turned away. Then, apparently satisfied, he climbed into the boat and started up the motor.

“See you tonight,” he said, putting away from the dock before pushing down the throttle.

#

When Dustin woke it felt as though his head had split open and hot white light was exploding from it. He had never been hung over before, and if this was what it was like he wasn’t sure why people ever drank. He had never been so thirsty in his life. Morning cartoons on low volume was all he could stand as the headache became a dull pulsing below the horizon of his thoughts.

He saw Claire walking up the trail, and pulled himself upright.

“Hello love,” Claire said, walking through the back door.

“Hello,” Dustin said.

“You feeling okay?” she asked.

“Ah, a little rough. How was your swim?”

“It was good,” Claire said. “I met the neighbors.”

“Neighbors?” Dustin asked. Claire sat down next to him.

“A couple, from New York, across the lake from us. They invited us for dinner tonight. I said we’d go.”

“Sure. Whatever you want,” he said, embarrassed by last night.

“It’ll be fun,” Claire said, as she snuggled up to Dustin, resting her hand on his stomach.

#

By 7:30 Dustin's headache had subsided and Claire was almost ready to go.

"Hello," he said, leaning his head into the bathroom. Claire looked nice. Her hair surprised him, still, when she blow-dried and straightened it.

"You look nice," he said.

"Thanks," she said.

It was still light out as they left to go to Chad's. In summer it could stay light as late as ten p.m. But they left the porch light on, since it would be dark when they got home.

"Do you know this house?" Claire asked Dustin when they were driving.

"Which house?"

"The house we're going to, was it here when you were a kid?"

"No," Dustin said. He thought to himself. "Well, I don't know. I don't remember it. I guess that doesn't mean it wasn't here. We'd drive this road a lot, and there was never a nice house. But maybe there was and it's a ways up off the road and we'd just never seen it."

But rounding the bend, not ten feet off the road, a gate opened onto a stone driveway, leading to a mansion. Dustin paused at the gates.

"I think I would have remembered this," he said.

This house's first floor exterior had clean white siding, the second floor had red, and the balcony around the house's top floor was a mixture of both. The house was all widows and angles. One of the doors of the four-car garage, to their left as they approached, was open, and a

red, restored, 1970's convertible Coupe de Ville sat in the space. Dustin parked the truck and shut off the engine.

“Well,” he said. He tried not to look too surprised. They walked up the stone walkway. Roses grew in front of the house, but most impressive was a four-foot-tall statue of a lion, carved from marble. It stood, regal, to one side of the walkway, and projected a steady stream of water over the walkway and into a shallow pool built of rough-cut stone. They walked beneath the water arc.

The front door was tall, stained wood, the brass knocker heavy in Dustin's hand. A young guy opened the door, and Dustin's first thought was that this guy was younger than Dustin thought he'd be.

“You made it,” he said, extending his hand. “I'm Chad.”

“Dustin,” Dustin said, shaking Chad's hand and stepping into the house.

“Claire,” Chad said, as if they were old friends. He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. A kiss on the cheek? Seriously? Dustin let it slide.

The rug in the entryway was enormous and beautiful. The floor was warm, rich wood, and the banister that wound up the stairs intricate and hand carved. Dustin feared he'd accidentally break something that was probably worth more than his truck.

“Right this way,” Chad said. They went into the kitchen.

“I'll give you the tour, but first let's have a drink.” A drink.

The kitchen floor was the same wood as in the entryway. The cabinets were unfinished, with glass fronts. There was a long marble island in the center of the kitchen. Above that, a

sturdy steel chandelier with cast iron pans and steel pots hanging from it. The refrigerator was a good two feet taller than Dustin. The countertops were white marble with flecks of black.

“Would you prefer a gin and tonic, or a glass of wine?” Chad asked.

“Wine?” Dustin said. He had never liked wine, but he wasn’t going to drink liquor. Chad smiled, as if Dustin had chosen correctly. Chad took a bottle from the wine cooler that was built into the side of the island, opened it, and poured the wine into three tall, delicate wine glasses.

The couches in the living room were leather, the TV enormous, and the whole back wall was made of windows. Outside, the patio curved around the screened-in pool, which looked out across a long, flat expanse of marsh. Dustin had expected the land behind the house to be forested, as his was. The sun set in the distance.

He was not jealous. This was what money could buy, and Chad had not earned his money.

“Your house is beautiful,” Claire said.

“Thank you,” Chad said.

“Cheers,” Dustin said. They raised their glasses above the table and brought them together, gently. Dustin was surprised that the wine wasn’t awful. In fact, it was actually pretty good.

“Shall we?” Chad asked, leading them out of the kitchen.

“What kind of wine is this?” Claire asked.

“Burgundy,” Chad said. “It’s French.”

“It’s good,” Dustin said.

Chad led them through the house, and Dustin found it absurd: the theater room with leather chairs and soundproofed walls. The wood-paneled den, with under-lit drawing table and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, which were, as Dustin and Claire came to learn, chestnut. A small room downstairs was still in progress, but would, one day, be a wine cellar, Chad assured them.

“Well of course,” Dustin said.

Then it was on to the back patio, where Chad’s wife Meg was seated beside the pool. The deck was made from large, rough-cut stones. The light in the pool turned the water turquoise. Tiki torches were placed around the deck, and on the far side was a grill, with smoke rising from it.

But most stunning was Meg, seated on a deck chair in a white dress, patterned in blue and purple flowers. The dress’ front was high on her chest, and two thin strings went from the top of the dress, at her collarbones, around and down her back.

“Dustin, Claire, this is Meg. Meg, this is Dustin and Claire.”

“Hi,” Meg said. Her teeth were bright white in the dusk light.

“Hey,” Dustin said.

“Pleasure,” Claire said.

“So,” Chad said, setting his glass of wine on table beside the grill and opening its top, “I’ve got salmon, asparagus, some summer squash. You eat fish, right?”

“Yeppo,” Dustin said, for some reason. He did not normally say ‘yeppo.’

“What do you do for work?” Chad asked.

“We’re both still in school,” Dustin said. “I’m going for engineering and Claire’s doing women’s studies.”

“Women’s studies, wonderful,” Chad said. No love for engineering.

“I had Yale friends who did women’s studies,” Meg said.

“Did you go to Yale, too?” Claire asked Chad.

“It’s where we met. My family are bulldogs from way back.”

“What do you do?” Dustin asked. Chad said he traded futures, which sounded cool, but Dustin wasn’t exactly sure what it meant.

“Futures?” he asked. He looked to see if Claire was following, but she was not.

“I’m in soft commodities: coffee, cocoa, sugar, fruit, stuff like that,” Chad said.

“So, like, you buy a hundred watermelons, you turn around and trade them in the future?” Dustin asked.

“Well, no, you’re not actually trading physical things. It’s like gambling. I say the price of watermelon is going to go up, other people say it’s going to go down, and we deal in the market fluctuation of that item.”

“So, then, when you’re trading,” Dustin said, “what are you actually trading?”

“Futures,” Chad said, as if this would make it all make sense.

“Right,” Dustin said, still unsure.

“I think I’m hungry,” Meg said.

“Sorry,” Chad said to Claire and Dustin, as if they were begging for him to tell them more, “but Meg gets bored when I talk about work.”

“That’s fine. I think we’re hungry, too,” Claire said.

“Of course,” Chad said.

They ate dinner in the dining room. More wine, and talk about what Meg did for work. Dustin and Claire were both curious to know. But her answer was a non-answer. She dabbled in various charities, and went to Lake Tahoe twice a year, though just to ski?

“How about a nightcap?” Chad asked, seemingly only to Dustin. Dustin said okay, though he wasn’t sure what a nightcap was. He rose and followed Chad upstairs.

#

Claire found herself suddenly alone with Meg, seated across the dining room table. They smiled at one another.

“Do you want to see my horse?” Meg asked, almost in boredom, so that Claire was unsure if she was supposed to want to or not.

“Sure,” she said.

“I’ll get us boots,” Meg said. Claire stood and waited for Meg to get them boots, whatever that meant. Meg came back with two sets of green rubber rain boots. The pair that Claire assumed was for her looked far too large. She was embarrassed, as they both put the boots on, that Meg’s toenails were painted a bright, warm orange, while Claire’s were unpainted and dirty in comparison. She made a mental note to buy more nail polish.

“Follow me,” Meg said. They went out the front door and up a path that ran around behind the house, into the swamp. It was dark now and Claire focused on not tripping. The stable

was surprisingly modest, about ten feet long, one-story, and built of large, sturdy wooden beams. A circle of dirt was fenced in, which was where Claire assumed the horse would trot.

The area smelled strongly of manure. The mosquitos were biting, but Claire tried not to slap too hard, lest Meg suggest they head home. She wanted them to spend time alone, to talk, to get to know one another.

“Have you always liked horses?” Claire asked. Meg laughed.

“Not really,” she said, “I don’t even really like them now. The stable was here on the property when Chad’s parents bought it. He got me the horse as a birthday present, *because girls love horses*,” she mocked. Claire realized how bored, how unhappy, Meg was here.

As they approached the stable the horse appeared suddenly in the dark, like an apparition. He, or she, was dark brown. Claire could see, in the faint light, a sign above the door that read, “Honey.”

“He just bought you a horse?” Claire asked.

“Yeah. I mean, I rode horses as a kid. But I didn’t ask for one. I was supposed to be overjoyed, but I’m like, ‘do you know how much work a horse is?’ But of course he doesn’t.”

Meg unlatched the gate and Claire followed her into the stable.

“At least he gets you nice stuff. No one’s ever bought me a horse before, I can say that.”

“Dustin doesn’t buy you things, Claire?” Meg asked. It was odd to hear her name from Meg’s mouth. She enjoyed it.

“He’s broke. His whole family is broke. If he can pay for his half of the groceries, I’m happy. Not that my family is really wealthy, either. My father is a minister.” They were standing

inside the stable now, which seemed far too small to hold them both and Honey. Perhaps, even too small to hold Honey.

“Ah,” Meg said, “here, take this.”

Claire reached through the darkness and found Meg’s hands. She was holding a wooden-handled, stiff-bristled brush. Claire shook with nervousness and excitement feeling Meg’s smooth, soft hands, and the hard, rough brush at the same time. The darkness only heightened the sensation.

“So now I have a horse to look after, when we’re here. I’m not sure who takes care of him when we’re not,” Meg said, her voice trailing off, as if she had never thought about this before.

They were both brushing Honey now. Claire hadn’t been this close to a horse in, she didn’t know how long. Claire could feel Honey’s muscles twitch beneath his flesh and wondered if this was normal.

She could see, beyond the riding circle, the outline of roots and trees, dark against the lesser dark. The swamp seemed to run for miles and Claire felt herself pulled toward *whatever* was out there. And yet, the smells of the horse and wood, of the leather saddles and riding equipment were all so pleasant.

“It’s lonely here,” Claire said.

Meg did not respond, and it was now too dark to see her face. But she was probably thinking the same thing. She was probably unhappy, also. Their brushes swept over Honey, his feet tapping the concrete as he shifted in the stall.

Suddenly, Claire leaned across the horse, reached one hand through the darkness, and found Meg's cheek, her jaw. She drew her into a kiss. Their teeth clicked together. Meg's lips were soft and wet. Claire pulled away, and for a second it was if the kiss had not happened. They stood silently in the darkness. Then the dread of what Meg might say swelled up inside Claire. She dropped the brush and ran from the stable.

What just happened? She ran to the house, past it, past the stupid lion spitting water across the walkway, past the truck parked in the driveway. Had Meg been into that? Why hadn't she pulled away? What did it mean that she hadn't?

About fifty feet down the road, back around the lake, Claire stopped to catch her breath. She felt like she might throw up, bent over, hands on her knees in the darkness. She was still wearing Meg's boots.

Claire took the boots off and walked back to the house. The gravel was cool but rough against the soles of her feet. She was going to run up, set the boots outside the front door, then jog home.

#

Dustin quickly learned that a nightcap was another drink. He and Chad went up to the study, on the third floor. The study was definitely one of the smaller rooms in the house. There were tall bookshelves from floor to ceiling on three of the walls and it gave the room a claustrophobic feel. The fourth wall was one large pane of glass that permitted no view outside. It was like a dark mirror that reflected everything in the room: the bookshelves, an old rifle that

seemed there just for show, the two chairs, the table between the chairs, which supported glass bottles of different colored liquids. *Carafes*, Dustin wanted to call them.

“Nice carafes,” he said.

“Thanks,” Chad said.

He and Chad sat in the high-backed chairs that faced the window. It seemed this room was built for two people to sit staring out the window. He was out of place in his boots and cargo shorts. Dustin took off his bandana and set it on the floor. Then, Chad opened a box in the middle of the table and Dustin saw that it was filled with ice. Because of course it was filled with ice. And the ice didn't even seem that melted because this container's whole purpose was to keep ice chilled. There were two glasses, and Chad took the tongs, because there were tongs, and began picking pieces of ice out of the bucket and filling the glasses.

The whole thing seemed totally arranged and planned in a way that was unsettling to Dustin.

“What do you drink?” Chad asked.

“Whatever you're having?” Dustin said.

“Scotch it is.”

“No,” Dustin said, and when Chad looked at him, he said, “I drank too much scotch last night. I'm still tasting it.” Chad smiled.

“Try this,” he said, and uncorked one of the bottles and poured some of the amber liquid into each of their glasses.

“So?” Dustin asked. He was ready to go home. He’d put in his time here. But then Chad took out cigars, and lit them, and handed one to Dustin.

“It’s nice to have someone over,” Chad said, and Dustin could tell he meant it. For a minute, he liked Chad. Dustin took more notice of the rifle. He had not noticed its age. The barrel and action were steel; its butt and forestock wooden and worn. Dustin went to the gun, and picked it up. It was heavy. The word Winchester was chiseled into the metal just above the trigger. It looked out of place in his hands, like it should be on a pedestal somewhere, always. Chad was smiling.

“It was my great grandfather’s,” he said. Dustin handed the gun to Chad, and sat down in his chair again. They both looked down at the gun, pleased with it. Chad raised it to his shoulder and aimed at the window. He lined the barrel up with the reflection of Dustin’s head. The barrel’s opening was a black marble, surrounded by the reflection of them both, of the room. It was like a black hole sucking the room out into the night until there would be none of it left.

“It’s black powder,” Chad said, lowering the gun, “we could go shoot, but the powder’s all gone.” Chad set the gun down against the bookshelf. Dustin was relieved.

“Do you ever hunt?” Dustin asked, taking a sip of his drink. It was sweet.

“No, you?” Chad asked.

“When I was a kid. I grew up across the lake.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, there’s not much hunting—just rabbits, squirrels, but it’s better than nothing.”

“I’ve always wanted to,” Chad said, “but my dad was never really into it. Yours was?” he asked.

“Sure, but my dad was a mean son of a bitch,” Dustin said. “He was a piece of shit.”

Chad nodded but didn’t ask for more at first. Then, hesitantly, he asked, “how so?”

“Well, he used to beat the shit out of me and my brother,” Dustin said, “and our mom.”

Chad sat his drink down, ashed his cigar, and Dustin saw, suddenly, that now it was Chad who had wandered into his world.

“But, whatever,” Dustin said. “I’m over it.”

#

Claire was almost to the front door with the boots when it opened. Out walked Chad and Dustin. Dustin had Claire’s flips flops in his hand, his arm over Chad’s shoulder. He was drunk, again.

“Claire,” Dustin said, saluting her with the hand holding the flops.

“Seems like you all had fun,” Claire said. She took the keys from Dustin and climbed into the truck’s driver’s seat. Chad helped Dustin as he struggled to get his seat belt on.

“Goodnight,” Chad said.

“Goodnight,” Dustin said. Claire started the truck, and they pulled out of the drive. As long as he doesn’t throw up, she thought. They drove in silence, Dustin looking out the window. He rolled it down and smoked. As if burdened by having to address her, Dustin asked, “What’s the matter?”

“You’re the matter,” she said. Dustin waited for more.

“Why am I the matter?” he asked.

“You just don’t really consider what I want,” Claire said. Dustin looked confused.

“I thought you wanted to go to dinner?”

“I wanted to go to Savannah. I wanted to spend our anniversary sleeping on nice hotel beds, eating in restaurants, visiting old churches. Not hanging out with some girl in a barn.”

“I thought you liked girls?” Dustin said. Claire let this sink in.

“I do like girls. And I like boys, too. Who I’m beginning to not like is you.”

“Well then I guess that’s it,” Dustin said. Claire wasn’t sure what he meant.

“What’s *it*?” she asked.

“I guess I’m not good enough for you.”

“It’s not that,” Claire said.

“And I was going to give you everything, too,” Dustin continued, “a house, a family, children.”

“Oh, yeah? You were going give *me* children? I don’t think so. If anything, I give you a family. I give you children.”

Dustin tossed his cigarette out the window and looked over at Claire.

“You’re out of line,” he said.

Claire shook her head. How had she allowed herself to believe, for so long, that this relationship could work?

Looking out to her left, across the lake, lights were on in various houses, somewhat obscured by the trees, but still visible. They formed a constellation.

One light belonged to Chad and Meg, one to Dustin. It occurred to Claire that while driving forward, she was also driving back, and these lights, like the northern star, or the constellations above, could guide her. She could navigate by their proximity.

In the real sky she saw actual constellations, bright and crisp this far from the city. There was Orion, or at least, there was his belt. And the little dipper, or maybe it was the big. Claire had never really learned astronomy, and she often found it difficult to see stars as anything more than just clusters of light, as coordinates on a plane that meant something to someone else, but were no easier to navigate by than the tenderness of her own heart.

## DEATH ON THE HIGHWAY

“Fences, cattle, roads, refineries, mines, gravel pits, traffic lights, graffiti’d celebration of athletic victory on bridge overpass, crust of blood on the Wal-Mart loading dock, the sun-faded wreaths of plastic flowers marking death on the highway are ephemeral.”

-Annie Proulx

The idea was to take a few weeks before the kids started back at school and see Mt. Rushmore. The kids had never really left San Diego, and it had been a while since Mark and I had taken a trip for pleasure. The drive *to* South Dakota went well, but now—four hours into our twenty-hour drive home—we’ve broken down in Thermopolis, Wyoming.

I’m not much of a mechanic. Okay, I know nothing about cars, but I know our car is in trouble. They’ve been replacing parts for a week now—fuel filter, fuel pump, fuel pump relay. We’ve ruled out the fuel system. The problem is the car won’t start. They’ve checked the starter, the transmission, the engine. They’ve replaced fuses, tubes and belts, parts I can’t even pronounce the name of, much less tell you what they do. It’s a lesson. If you’re going to take a family road trip across America, drive Ford, drive Chevy, drive something American. Don’t drive a Volvo.

#

We’ve just had breakfast, which I cooked on our new Coleman double-burner propane stove. We’re impromptu campers. Our campsite is identical to the model campsite at Tim’s New Adventure outdoor store, which wasn’t in the budget, but was a necessity when we broke down. Now, Mark and the kids sit around the sandy picnic table, eggs and pancakes on paper plates and

covered in tinfoil, coffee in Styrofoam cups. I'm picking up all their garbage. Mark reads the paper, Chris plays his Nintendo DS, and Riley reads *Seventeen* magazine on Mark's iPad.

Sometimes I'm embarrassed by my family in the context of this RV Park. Our camping gear is nice and new, our car not only foreign but a new model. The kids here don't play on iPads, they help their parents. The men here wake up early and slave at blue collar jobs. They work with their hands. When my husband mentions how long he's been out of work they don't say anything, being polite.

"Mark, will you come into town with me today? Talk with the mechanic for a bit?" He doesn't look up from his paper but says, "Can't, busy day. I'm raking leaves for Jed at noon and painting the walls in the laundry room after that." In some ways, Wyoming has been good for my husband. The owner, Jed, has been giving him odd jobs to do. Although, this too is embarrassing, because I'm pretty sure Mark's just taken up Jed's kid's chores around the park.

"You've been painting the laundry room for the last three days," I say.

"Just needs one more coat. You can't rush these things, Jules." I *don't* pour him another cup of coffee from our new GSI Outdoors Enamelware Percolator, even though his cup is almost empty.

"What about you, Chris?" I ask.

"What?" he says. I sit on the picnic table bench across from him.

"Will you come with me to check on the car?" I can't remember the last time I had a conversation with Chris that wasn't peppered with the sounds of his Nintendo DS or his cell phone. He won't even look up from the screen.

“I’m gonna have to say no. I’ve got a pretty full schedule today. Maybe next time?”

You want your kids to have everything, to have more than you had, but then you give it to them, and they ignore you. Sometimes I wish we had less money, that we couldn’t afford to give the kids so much. Then they’d appreciate what they had a little more.

“What about you, Riley?” I ask, reaching out for her hand. If I have hope for anyone, it’s Riley. She lowers the iPad.

“Not today,” she says. I can sense her guilt.

“That’s fine,” I say. Besides, this trip was my idea. The car breaking down is my responsibility too.

I ride into town with Gus, the RV Park handyman, to check on the car. On our way we pass, as we have on every drive into town, the large billboard that reads REKINDLE YOUR HAPPILY EVEROPOLIS. Beneath these words is a photo of a couple sitting in the mineral springs, one of Thermopolis’ attractions. I wonder, as I do every time we pass this billboard, if Mark and I will rekindle anything on this trip. We’ve just seemed a little out of sync recently. Chalk it up to marriage, kids, work, whatever; I just don’t want to be one of those couples.

Gus has to grab a few things from the hardware store before dropping me at the mechanic’s, so I wait outside and thumb through a *USA Today*. The headline is about The Viper. Everyone has been following the search for this guy. He abducted a little girl in Seattle. A jogger found her, dead in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. The Viper took another, a boy, in L.A. He turned up in Denver. Most recently, The Viper kidnapped a little girl from Cheyenne, about 200 miles from here. They don’t even have a picture of the guy.

When Gus comes out I put the paper back on the rack.

“How ‘bout that?” he asks.

“It’s awful,” I say.

When we get to the mechanic I thank Gus for the ride and go inside. Our mechanic, Austin, is standing behind the register. He’s a tall man, six-three, and big, with a long, wiry beard with strands of gray in it.

“Morning,” he says.

“Good morning, Austin.”

We walk into the garage, where the Volvo is parked next to the Harley Austin has been fixing up. It’s hot in the garage, the oil and gas smell cooked into everything. I stare into our car’s open hood—a city of metal and rubber tubing—that I can’t make heads or tails of. I was hoping the part we ordered would be in, but it isn’t.

“Should be in tomorrow,” Austin says. He lights a cigarette.

#

There are a few things I didn’t know about Wyoming before we broke down.

One, there are dinosaurs here, buried beneath the ground, and in the face of the cliffs, waiting to be discovered.

Two, there exists in America land so dry, so full of stone and heat, that it is a wonder anything grows here at all.

And, three, with fifty people in an RV Park, if you’re not in line by 5:30 in the morning, you’re taking cold showers.

Today's Tuesday and that means Poker Night at Kincaid's Korner, which is the name for Bob Kincaid's double-wide and the dirt that surrounds it. Mark played last Tuesday and he has a standing engagement to play next Tuesday. My family acts as if we're never going to leave. Their social calendars are fuller here than they were back home.

My oldest, Chris, thinks he is going on the annual Loot N' Shoot two weeks from now. The basic idea being loot Harvey's liquor store, then go hunt for three days. My husband has yet to realize he isn't going, either.

Riley even has a date for homecoming, in September. I lived in Southern Indiana for fourteen years before my homecoming and still went stag. My family has taken to Wyoming, and Wyoming has taken to my family.

There are three kinds of people here and none of them are like us.

First, you have people who *live* in Thermopolis: friendly, hardworking, salt of the earth folk who smoke Marlboros and drive trucks. They drink Budweiser, watch Fox, and go to church every Sunday.

Then there are the people who come here because they like it, to visit. There are many of them at Osprey RV Park. These are the people who bought million dollar homes, to go. They have everything you and I have—dishwashers, a television set, marital trouble—except their house key not only unlocks the front door, but also starts the engine.

Last you have the people who found themselves here, and *stayed*. Like on purpose. Like who were passing through and could leave, whenever they want, except they're over by the BBQ pit talking about Friday's fish fry with Gus the handyman.

The owners of the Osprey RV Park, Jed and Nancy, are kind people. Sure, they have their quirks like everyone else. Do I know if Jed can use his legs? No. Because I've only seen him riding around in his golf cart, patrolling. And does Nancy ever leave the office? Like, to sleep? I don't know, because from the time I wake up to the time I go to bed, she's in the office. When I had to retrieve Mark from Kincaid's Korner at two in the morning, because he'd drunk too much, Nancy was there in the office, doing laundry.

How Jed and Nancy had four kids, I don't know, unless he pulled his golf cart right into the office and they did it there next to the firewood and the bug spray.

Since tonight's Tuesday, I'll be going over to Cynthia Neal's trailer, also known as The Vixen's Den. There's a big, fake, carved stone out front that says so. Cynthia's husband passed away two years ago. They were in Wyoming for the summer. She's one of the ones who stayed. I picture the sign outside the office displaying rates—weekly, monthly, eternally.

People treat Cynthia like she is the only woman in the world smart enough to buy a blender. Really, people feel bad for her because she's older and alone. Not that she's a terribly off-putting person, it's just that Cynthia Neal is a talker. And she thinks she's an expert in everything, and I mean everything: men, children, matters of the heart, cooking, cleaning, and she has no trouble sharing her infinite wisdom.

I can hear the blender going as I approach her trailer. I'm on such friendly terms with these ladies by now that I just walk in. And there they are, all sitting around Cynthia's living room of a back seat, drinking margaritas out of tall, plastic goblets hand-painted with little fish. There is a large platter of veggies on her kitchen table, with the same fish pattern. Everyone

liven up when I walk in. My novelty has yet to wear off. I've never been a smoker, but, with how much they smoke in this trailer, I might as well take it up. I am the youngest woman in the room by fifteen years.

I take a seat next to Cynthia, cross my legs, and finger the Velcro on my sandal. Everything about Cynthia's place—the string of pastel fish lights, the plastic bowls filled with fake fruit, the neon swirl-pattern rug—is done up in the decorative style of a good discount.

Cynthia fixes me a margarita in a tall, plastic goblet. I sip it and lick the salt off my upper lip. The women are all talking about the Viper, again.

"I hear he walks with a limp because he crashed a stolen plane, up in Canada," Charlotte says.

"Well, I heard he broke out of Folsom prison, killed six guards. *Six*," Maggie says.

"Maggie, please," Cynthia says. "I heard the real story." Cynthia might talk too much, but when she does everyone listens.

"Heard it from Bill Thompson. His son lives down in Cheyenne, you know, where the young one disappeared from. This Viper character is from Spokane," she says. "You know why they call him The Viper?"

"Because he strikes like a viper," Maggie says, and everyone laughs. She's just trying to be part of the story.

"No. Because he's got a tattoo of a viper, right here," Cynthia says, pulling back her myriad bracelets. "Right here on his wrist."

“Well, what did he do?” I ask, more because I like the way Cynthia tells a story, than because I don’t know the answer. The room is silent. *Everyone* knows the story, reads it in the paper every morning, but for some reason we can’t seem to get enough of it.

“He took a little girl, out near Spokane,” she says. “Just plucked her up as she was playing outside. They found her body in San Francisco. A young, little thing, eight years old,” Cynthia says. I think of Riley.

“Then he took that poor boy from L.A., tore across the west, holed up in places like Reno and El Paso, towns where a man like that blends in. They found that poor little boy’s body in Denver. Now he’s got a girl from Cheyenne, a real young thing, too. Somebody’s child.” The room is quiet.

“I wonder what he’s like,” I say.

“I’d rather not find out,” Charlotte says.

By the time we wrap things up at Cynthia’s, it’s late. I say goodnight, and make my way back to our campsite. The safety light is on above the office, and in the bathroom, but other than that it’s dark. I’m still stunned by how many stars are visible in the Wyoming night sky. When I get back to camp, Mark is sitting at the picnic table smoking a cigarette.

“Evening,” he says, raising his bottle of Budweiser. I sit down across from him, reach across the table, and pick up his beer. The bottle is warm, but I take a sip anyways.

“How are you?” I ask.

“You know,” he says, “not half bad.” I can tell he’s drunk. We’ve been married sixteen years and, luckily, neither of us has ever had much interest in drinking, never had problems with

it the way some folks do. But in Wyoming, Mark has taken to it. I think I've seen him drunk more times since we broke down than I have the entire time I've known him. And I'm not criticizing. Despite the fact that he hasn't really helped with the car much, I think it's good for him, and for us all, to be on vacation. We needed this trip. We needed a break from normal life: the kids from school and San Diego, me from work, Mark from sitting around the house tweaking his resume and going to one dead-end interview after another. It's not his fault, the economy is just bad right now, but it'll get better. He'll find something.

"How was Kincaid's Korner?" I ask. We both smile. This campsite, this breakdown, its jokes, have brought us a little closer together.

"It was good. I lost money, but it was good." Mark takes two beers from the cooler, opens them, and hands me one.

"How was Cynthia's?" he asks.

"It was good. Margaritas. There's a killer on the loose," I say, and we both chuckle at the absurdity of all of this. A car turns into the campsite, and makes its way slowly around the paved circle of road that winds through the camp. It's Tom, a Floridian who comes here each summer. He's part of the group that drinks at Tina's Tavern, a bar at the corner of the dirt road that leads to the RV Park and the main road that leads into town. Mark clears his throat, and I think he's going to say something about Tom.

"You ever miss that old Pontiac?" he asks.

"Hell no," I say. We laugh.

When we met, Mark had this beat up old Pontiac Catalina—rusted out body, noisy engine, some smell we could never get rid of—that we drove everywhere. When we were in college, we'd parked in La Jolla, overlooking the ocean. Sweaty summer nights cramped in the backseat, my back sticking to the vinyl, our feet sandy against the interior. The waves crashed on the beach. That was 2000, which seems like such a simpler time. The world felt less broken then, politically, financially, spiritually.

Mark stands and comes around to my side of the table, sits down next to me on the bench. I kiss him. Normally clean-shaven for work, his stubble is rough against my lips. His breath is hot and beery. He leans into me, stands and leads me to our tent, where he struggles with the zipper in the dark. Once he's got it open, he holds the flap open for me.

I crawl through the opening, into our tent that smells like the polyester of our sleeping bags and the vinyl of our air mattress. We undress hurriedly in the dark. I'm sandy, sweaty, wearing the same clothes I have been for days. I haven't washed my hair since we've broken down.

The ground is slippery beneath us—sheets against the vinyl air mattress, the sleeping bag's nylon. My back presses against the wall of the tent, this tiny fabric house, as I take off my shirt. We roll over, and Mark is on top of me, kissing my neck, my collarbones, my stomach. Through the mesh top of the tent I see a sky filled with stars. I take Mark's head in my hands, his hair wound round my fingers, and kiss him. His chin is rough with stubble. When Mark presses against me, I can feel the hard ground beneath us, through the air mattress. I want him to push me down, through the mattress, through the tent bottom. I want our bodies to cut a deep rut in the

soil. After we leave, I want them to find the hollowed ground of our lovemaking, still warm to the touch.

#

In the morning, I catch a ride with Gus up to the mechanics. Austin is sitting in the office when I arrive.

“Good morning,” he says.

“Good news?” I ask. He stands, his flannel tucked neatly into his jeans,

“Follow me,” he says. I follow him into the garage, where our car sits with its hood closed.

“Remember how I told you we replaced the fuel pump?” he asks, and I do. \$400 and still no working car. I remember well.

“Well, apparently these Volvos have two fuel pumps, one in front here,” he says, tapping on the hood, “and a second around here in the back, actually inside the gas tank. So, I replaced the second pump.” Austin holds up my keys and smiles.

“Really?” I ask. I climb into the front seat, and turn the key. The car starts up. And it stays running. I smile up at Austin, jump out of the car, and wrap my arms around him. I kiss him on the cheek.

“I’m buying you lunch,” I say, marching into the office.

#

I drive our Volvo back to camp, but there isn’t the big return celebration I’m looking for because Wednesday’s pretty quiet around the RV Park. Between Cynthia’s Margarita Bash and

Bob Kincaid's Poker Night, 90% of people are hungover on Wednesday. It's for this reason that horseshoes doesn't start until four.

I park at our campsite. My family is sitting at the picnic table eating sandwiches. I walk across our sandy site triumphantly.

"She's fixed!" I say.

"Sweet," Chris says.

"Honey, can I talk to you about something, really quick?" Mark says. I've got the keys in my hand and I'm twirling them around my finger. We leave tomorrow.

"We're going to be late to the horseshoes," Chris says, like he's ever cared about horseshoes. We walk away from the kids and Mark tells me what he's done. Not only did he lose money at poker, but he lent money to Jed during the game. Five hundred dollars.

"He can pay me back Friday when he collects money from the month-to-monthers," Mark says.

"Five *hundred*?" I ask. "But the car is fixed. We can leave tomorrow. I'm not waiting until Friday."

"Well then we walk away from the money," he says.

#

The way horseshoes works is simple. You get three shoes. If the shoe lands in the dirt touching the rail, that's one point. If the shoe lands around the rail but not touching it, that's two points. Around and touching, that's a ringer: three points.

There are a few methods to throwing horseshoes, but only one surefire rule I've found: the madder I am, the better I play, and tonight I'm cleaning up. You don't get to stand next to your partner, and thank God, because I'd probably hit Mark in the head if he were standing anywhere near me.

I can't tell what I'm more upset about, that Mark lent out five hundred dollars without asking me, or that we have to spend two more days here. I wind up, throw underhand, and watch the horseshoe fly. It's dusk, and I can barely see the outline of the shoe, but it doesn't matter. As soon as it leaves my hand, I know it's good.

When horseshoes is finished, I decide to skip game night and walk up to Tina's Tavern, though I've never been. The tavern is quiet. Country music plays on the jukebox. The place smells like smoke and wood and dust. It's the closest thing to a saloon I've ever been in. Steve from Florida is sitting at the bar, having a Budweiser with Sam, the tow truck driver for the tri-county area.

I walk past the only other man in the bar, a middle-thirties cowboy type, smoking a cigarette, and join Steve and Sam at the bar.

"Well, if it isn't Miss Julie," Steve says. Steve is loud and uncouth, his southern accent strong when he drinks. Sam is quieter, bashful. The bar, like so many places in Wyoming, seems to have been built by one of the first men to settle here. And no doubt, there's a picture of that fella behind the bar, with his arm around his missus.

Tom's cigarette's smoke trills upward. I order a Budweiser from the bartender—a cloudy-eyed woman in her mid-sixties—and lean my forearms against the bar. The bottle is cold

in my hand. The man in the booth is reflected in the mirror behind the bar. He is young. His hair is long, and blond, his jaw stern but not severe. His jean jacket is dusty.

I'm halfway through my second beer when the bartender says, "We're closing."

"Sure," I say. I feel sleepy and pleasant now, my anger subsiding into dull frustration. I put money on the bar and say goodnight.

For how hot it is during the day, it actually gets pretty chilly here at night. The cold beer doesn't help. As I walk the dirt road back to camp, a red pickup, a Toyota, jostles up behind me and pulls onto the shoulder. Its headlights illuminate the sand around my feet, and the expanse of flat earth, and flat rock beyond. It's still strange to be in a place like this, with so little around in every direction, and without any downtown lights in the distance. I walk to the passenger's side of the truck. People are so friendly here, always offering a ride, a helping hand. I'm going to miss it when we get home.

I walk to the driver's side. The window is down and a country song plays soft inside the cab. The young man from the bar, lit now by the steering console, is at the wheel.

"Care for a ride?" he asks, his cigarette's tip hot orange. "It's chilly," he offers. I look back to the bar, then up the road toward camp. It is a bit chilly.

"It's not far, just up the road, to the RV camp there."

"Hop in," he says, as if I'd be insulting him if I didn't. The smoke from his cigarette drifts smoothly out the window as the truck jounces down the sandy road. A country song plays on the radio.

"Name's Wes," he says.

“Julie,” I say. Wes looks me up and down, my Birkenstocks, khaki capris and checkered blouse. I must seem strange to him.

“What brings you here?” he asks. The way he says *here* sounds like the way I’ve been saying it in my head all this time, such as “I can’t believe we’re stuck *here*.”

“Our car broke down,” I say.

“Oh, that’s too bad,” Wes says. “Our?”

“My husband and I, we’re on a trip with our kids. We’ve been stuck here a week.”

“That’s too bad,” Wes says again. He drops his cigarette out the window.

“Well, this is me,” I say, as we approach the park. We pass the entrance, the truck’s headlights illuminating the sign momentarily. I turn and watch it pass. I can see the light on above the bathrooms.

“That was it,” I say quickly. “There’s another turn up here though.” I scoot forward in my seat.

“There’s no sign for this one, it’s just before the curve.” I say, but we rattle past it, too.

“It was just there,” I say. “You can let me out here, it’s fine.” The corners of Wes’ lips curl up. He takes another cigarette from his pack, and lights it. His calm unsettles me and I have a sour feeling in my stomach, like I’ve made a mistake, and a rusty RV outside of town comes into my mind, and I know I don’t want to end up there. Nothing good could come of it. We’re going too fast for me to jump, though.

“My husband, other people, they’re expecting me. It’s game night,” I say, “They’ll miss me if I’m not back in time.” This is only half a lie. I honestly don’t know when they’d begin to wonder about me, maybe not until tomorrow.

Wes doesn’t take me back to his trailer, but to a camp in the woods. There’s a fire pit—orange embers that turn on and off like Christmas lights. Empty beer cans litter the ground. A tarp’s tied up to a tree, although it wouldn’t do much to keep rain out. There’s a sleeping pad beneath it. Next to that is a small cooler, a stump, the wrapper from a gas station sandwich with an orange price tag that’s been stamped \$3.99 in bold, black letters.

“What are we doing here?” I ask.

“Shut up,” Wes says. He puts newspaper in the fire. The flames lick the paper’s crisp edges.

“I’m cold,” I say, not a lie, it’s chilly out. The flames flick across Wes’ face. He piles sticks onto the lit paper, the smell of smoke, the flames grow. He goes into the silver box in the truck bed and fishes out a tan jacket. It’s made of a tough material—thick, warm—the type of jacket construction workers wear on cold nights. He extends the jacket to me and as I take it from him, I grab his wrist. It is thin and bony—his skin cold. I pull back his sleeve, exposing the tattoo of a snake coiled around his wrist, disappearing up into his sleeve. I drop the jacket into the dirt.

“If you try to run I will chase you and I will kill you,” he says. I don’t move. I believe him.

“I’m not going to run,” I say.

“Good,” he says. He picks up the jacket, dusts it off, and hands it to me. I slide my arms into the sleeves, the lining cool against my sunburnt skin. Wes sits down on a stump and takes two beers from the nearby cooler.

“Here,” he says, offering me one. I take it. How does this work? Where would it happen, on the sleeping pad? What, exactly, would happen?

The nearest thing is the campsite, and I don’t think I could run all the way there, at least not faster than him. He’s trim, and though he smokes, he seems like the type who can run.

I picture the headline in the paper: Wife, mother of two, found dead in the woods outside Thermopolis. I can picture them back at the RV Park shaking their heads. I had a feeling, they’d say. City folks, they’d say. And I can’t help but feeling that Nancy, or Cynthia, or Suzanna, wouldn’t have gotten themselves into this predicament. Wouldn’t have gotten in the truck. Did I just look like easy bait?

“So,” I say, walking over to the truck. There is a spare tire in the bed of it, perhaps a tire iron? I could hit Wes, knock him out, steal the truck. I reach, as casually as I can, into the bed of the truck.

“Stay out of my truck,” Wes snaps.

“I was just looking for something to sit on.”

“Here,” Wes says, standing. He leans against a nearby tree. I drag the stump to the other side of the fire so that both he and the truck are in view. For all I know he’s not out here alone, and maybe he’s the nice one.

He bites his upper lip, and seems to be trying to decide something. Everything I think to say sounds like a movie, but I say it anyways.

“If you let me go I won’t tell anyone about you. You’ll have a head start, it’ll take me at least half an hour for me to walk back to camp.”

“Is that so?”

I open my beer and take a sip, move my feet closer to the small fire. Even if I had the tire iron, I couldn’t overpower him. He’s got at least six inches on me, fifty-sixty pounds, there’s no way. I can’t run. I can’t fight. Wes looks bothered by something.

“What’s the matter?” I ask. A warm feeling rises from my gut into my chest, my throat. It sits like a light on the back of my tongue. My muscles are tight with adrenaline.

“Where you from?” I ask.

“Shut up,” he says.

“I’m just curious what your plan--”

“I said shut up.”

Wes shakes his empty beer can, tosses it into the fire.

“Are you nervous?” I ask. Wes gives me a look like *don’t push it*. I sip my beer and look into his face. I wonder what Mark would do if he was here right now, and what are they playing back at camp, and who’s winning. I picture us getting into the car tomorrow and driving off, back to San Diego, this whole Thermopolis breakdown a bad memory. But now that drive seems like an impossibility. I begin crying.

“I’m sorry,” I tell Wes, though I’m not.

Wes walks over to the back of the truck and takes a rag out of the steel toolbox. He tosses it to me across the fire, and it lands in the sand. I pick it up, shake the sand out of it, and wipe my eyes.

“Stand up,” he says. I set my beer down on the stump. The fire is warm on the backs on my legs. I put my hands into the jacket pockets. Wes takes the rag and blindfolds me.

“Now turn around.”

I do as he says. Then his bony fingers are on my shoulders. The rag is rough cotton, it smells of oil, grease. I cry and the rag becomes damp against my eyes. The strange jacket, the smell of the fire and this rag, the crack of the embers, the cool of my legs vs. the warmth of my torso, stuck in this strange place with this frightening man. I feel like someone I’ve never been before, alive in ways I’ve never experienced. I don’t want to die. *I’m not going to die*, I tell myself. *I’m not going to die*.

The ground is sandy beneath my feet. I step cautiously. It’s impossible to see out of the blindfold. Twigs crack beneath my feet. Wes’s hands are a steady presence that goosebumps my flesh and send shivers down my spine. I focus on the sound of our breathing. We head uphill, slightly.

The ground changes from sand to stone. There’s more of a breeze here, as if we’ve come out of the shelter of the trees. My legs, in shorts, feel frigid. Wes’ hands fall from my shoulders. Then nothing. I wait for the loud crack of a gun, or his hands around my neck, the blow of a shovel to my temple. Something. Some brief flash of pain before the hot white light of oblivion.

Nothing.

Something small and metal clinks on the ground behind me. His belt buckle, perhaps? I can't help it, I picture Wes naked from the waist down, his jeans around his ankles. I wait, but there is only silence. I purse my lips, squeeze my eyes tight.

Nothing.

I flex every muscle in my body in anticipation of his touch. My ears strain to hear anything at all above the sound of the wind through the grass.

"Hello?" I say, my voice caught in my throat. No response. I rip off the blindfold.

On the ground in front of me is a girl, no more than seven or eight. Her lips are deep blue, and she's shivering like crazy. Her wrists, ankles, and mouth are duct taped. On the ground, behind me, are Wes' keys.

I shove the keys into my jacket pocket and lift the girl into my arms. Time accelerates. We cross the rock into the trees, through the trees, back to Wes' camp, the fire nearly out. The truck, which is still there, is so beautiful.

I open the passenger side door and lay the girl down on the seat, covering her with the heavy jacket. Where has he gone? I look around, but what does it matter? He's gone. He's gone and we're still alive.

I rush to the driver's side and climb in, thrusting the key into the ignition before I've even closed the door. The truck churns to life. That same cowboy radio station comes on. Warm air pours from the vents, and the headlights spill out over the cactus and the sagebrush. I pull the truck onto the road and head toward the RV Park, where my family is waiting, where my family

will welcome me. I turn off the radio and accelerate, the speedometer climbing—50, 60, 70—  
fleeing what will always be there, behind us, when and if we choose to look.

## JUNE, SPECIFICALLY

My most recent job is *Good Will Hunting*. You've probably seen it, but in case you haven't, I'll fill you in. It's the story of Will, a young boy from the south side of Boston, who grew up an orphan, spent time in juvie, and works as janitor at MIT. Oh yeah, also, Will is a genius: photographic memory, gifted at math, there's nothing he can't do. I find this movie especially challenging to describe due to the complexity of Matt Damon's character, that of a tender, injured soul hidden beneath a confident, violent exterior. IMDB gives the film an 8.3 out of 10. Rotten Tomatoes gave it 97%. Not to mention, it took home two Oscars.

I work from home, as an audio describer for the blind. I describe the action in movies and television. If you're thinking, *that sounds like an easy job, you watch movies all day*, then you're half right. For some, the job is easy. But not when you take it seriously, not when you view describing as an art, and let me tell you, it is an art. Describing was a natural job choice for me, because my Mom was blind, she had macular degeneration. She loved movies, and it was my job to fill her in on the action.

She passed away earlier this year.

Describing is a growing industry. It used to be tough to find described movies, but now the American Council for the Blind, and other organizations, are lobbying for every movie and TV show to be described. Many popular shows are already described, such as *House of Cards* and *The Office*. Seven of the films nominated for Oscars this year were described. And one day, there might even be an Oscar for best audio description.

I'm sitting in my living room, at the desk where I have my recording equipment. It's morning, and I have a pot of coffee brewing in the kitchen. But right now, I'm just drinking water. Water is good for the vocal chords, and it's important to take care of your voice. Avoid caffeine and alcohol, salty or spicy foods, and any dairy. The coffee is for my girlfriend, Gretchen, who is asleep in the bedroom. She drank too much last night, and when she wakes up she's going to want a cup of coffee with her morning cigarette. Do I even have to mention that you shouldn't smoke? It is absolutely the worst for your voice.

I open Garage Band, which is where I record my descriptions. I also pull up a downloaded version of the film in VLC media player. I queue up the scene I'm currently working on, a real doozy. Will's girlfriend, Skylar, played by Minnie Driver, has just asked him to move to California with her. I have the description script I've written open on my iPad so that I can move through it without the sound of turning pages. The process of writing the script is weird, reducing the whole world down to action. But oddly, this is how I most like it. Devoid of the context of dialogue, it is action that shows who we really are. Reading over old scripts, I don't even need to hear the dialogue in the film. I know exactly what's happened.

I listen to the film through headphones, so that the film itself is not recorded with my voice. I record in the empty space between dialogue. In this scene, Will and Skylar are lying in bed. Will is shirtless, and Skylar is rubbing her hand over his back. Will tells Skylar he can't go to California with her, and she says that if he doesn't love her... *Will stands... Skylar stands... Skylar stands between Will and the door... Will slams his fist into the wall... Will leaves the room... Skylar crumples onto the bed... Will walks across the campus lawn, still shirtless, putting*

*his shoes on as two girls pass.* I'm debating the world *crumple*. Other options: collapse, slump, swoon, wither.

I pause the film so that I can be sure my voice has synced in the appropriate places, and when I do, Gretchen comes out from the bedroom. She's wearing pajama bottoms, and nothing else. Her eyes are puffy because she is hung over and because she was crying last night. We stayed up until four a.m. fighting. I would like to say we rarely fight, but that would be a lie. At least three nights a week Gretchen drinks too much and flips. She can be mean, reckless, destructive. We're in a terrible place—we love each other, but not enough; enough to stay together, but not enough to put aside our disagreements, to complete the myriad small gestures of romance. And maybe it's not love but habit and fear that's keeping us together. I remember a line from a song, we've done this so long we're not sure how not to. Maybe we're too afraid of being alone.

Gretchen pours herself a cup of coffee, walks over, and puts her hand on my shoulder. I take off my headphones.

“Good Morning,” I say.

“Good morning, Calvin,” she says.

The mornings after Gretchen has gotten drunk and fought with me she is tender as a lamb. There's a good chance she doesn't even fully remember what happened last night, and she's not going to ask. She takes her shirt from the arm of the couch and pulls it on, takes her L&M cigarettes from the coffee table and goes onto the back porch. Do I want her to get better? To stop drinking? Of course. I've broached therapy, talked counseling, promoted meetings. No

dice. Now, if I so much as mention her drinking, I'm *judgmental*. I'm an *asshole*. Am I trying to police her? No. I'm not her parole officer, and I don't want to be.

I shut down my computer. We have to head to Birdie's house anyway. I go to the kitchen, and pour myself a cup of coffee. My ears still feel the headphones' phantom pressure. Gretchen comes in from the porch smelling of smoke.

"What are we doing today?" she asks. I glance at the clock above the stove, which reads 11 a.m. It's Saturday. I told her last night that we needed to go to Birdie's today, so that I can clean out her lake fucker-upper.

"We're going over to Birdie's, remember?" Gretchen nods like she does.

"I'll change into my suit," she says. Every Sunday Gretchen and I go to the same bar for lunch and beer. Birdie is a regular there. She lives around the corner from the bar, in a ritzy neighborhood on a lake. She has this machine attached to her dock—she calls it her lake fucker-upper—that sweeps the lake floor like a long clock hand, cleaning up muck and scum. The machine jams, so, one Saturday a month I go over and clean the debris out of it.

#

It takes us twenty minutes to drive to Birdie's. I type the four-digit code into the keypad at the gate and wait for it to open. My truck idles gently. Gretchen blows a thin stream of cigarette smoke out the open window. In the mid-June Florida heat the smoke is barely visible.

The gate opens. I pull into the neighborhood. Trees stretch from both sides of the street and meet above the road. A canopy. The sun is bright and hot. Birdie's house is a three-story brick colonial.

“I’m sorry for fighting last night,” I say, hoping Gretchen will say it back.

“That’s okay,” she says. I get out of the truck and slam the door behind me, a little more aggressively than I would have liked.

I knock but no one answers. I knock louder. Birdie answers wearing a bathing suit, a shawl wrapped around her waist and legs. She’s in good shape for being in her late fifties.

“Good morning,” Birdie says. We follow her into the house, which smells like sunscreen, and soon see the coconut rum and pineapple juice on the counter. The blender is full of yellow, icy, pina colada.

“Hell yeah,” Gretchen says. Birdie pours the slush into three large, plastic Florida Gator cups.

“Thanks for coming over, you guys.” We smile and sip our drinks. The ice is cool on my tongue, cloyingly sweet and delicious.

We go into the backyard, which is wide, and stretches a hundred feet from the house to where the lake begins. Birdie doesn’t just live on one lake, but a whole chain of lakes. She had her husband build a beach down by the water. We walk to it, and when we get there Birdie and Gretchen lie back in the lounge chairs, sunglasses on, drinks in hand.

I can see, through the cloudy lake water, the 60-foot circle of ground that has been cleared out by the lake fucker-upper. The thing works. Weeds and muck are all over the lake bottom but the area surrounding Birdie’s dock is just pure sand. I take my shirt off and wade out into the water. I get a few pity whoops from Gretchen and Birdie, but I know they’re only being

nice. Because, here is something else you need to know about me: I am a big guy. Not only am I six-three, but I clock in at 240 on a good day, and I'm not talking muscular.

"I don't know that you're going to be able to fix it this time, Calvin. It's jammed. I mean, really jammed," Birdie says.

"I'll do my best," I say, wading into the water. In the bright, hot sun the water feels great. I swim out to the tip of the dock, where the fucker-upper is attached, the mineral tasting lake water lapping into my mouth. I dive down and unscrew the motor. Then there is the awkward swim to shore with the heavy motor in my hand. I carry the motor up onto the beach. This should be Birdie's husband's job, but he's opposed to the machine because it destroys the lake's natural habitat.

Gretchen and Birdie have both finished their pina coladas and are drinking Corona. Gretchen's koozie says *FINISH YOUR BEER. THERE ARE SOBER PEOPLE IN CHINA.* Birdie's koozie has a zipper that goes up its neck, like her beer is wearing a scuba suit. By the time I get this thing cleaned out they'll both be drunk.

"Anyway, he's paranoid," Birdie says. "He thinks I'm having an affair. He wants to know what I'm doing all the time. I can't stand the asshole." Her husband.

"Really?" Gretchen asks, with interest. She faces Birdie. The Xanax she took on the way over (for "anxiety") has given her mouth a relaxed, pouty look. "Are you?" she asks.

"No," Birdie says. "No. He freaks at me, though. He's *crazy.*"

"Is he violent?" Gretchen asks.

Birdie chuckles.

“Only to himself.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I mean, he beats himself up. When he’s mad. When he’s really mad, like, if he was gonna hit me. Instead, he hits himself.”

“Like *Fight Club*?” Gretchen asks.

“I don’t know, I haven’t seen it,” Birdie says.

“That’s bizarre,” I say, pieces of motor spread out in front of me on the grass, the steel glinting in the hot sun. Once I’ve gotten the motor apart, it’s pretty easy to clean out the weeds and sand that has built up in there over the last month.

“You guys want to have dinner tonight?” Birdie asks, “Todd is getting home from a business trip.” Todd is the husband.

“We can’t,” I say. “I have to get some work done tonight.”

“Another time,” Birdie says.

#

We get back to my, *our*, apartment around four. Gretchen opens a beer and plops down on the couch. I live in The Lofts, downtown. It’s a tall, new building for twenty- and thirty-something career types. You can see the lake from my window.

I sit down at my desk, because I’d like to get *Good Will Hunting* done by tonight. My dad has invited me to dinner tomorrow night to celebrate his retirement, so I’m not going to have much time to work. Gretchen looks at me, beer in her hand.

“Working?” she asks. I can tell that she wants me to sit with her, to spend time with her. And really, I would like to. But I *have* to work. I have to get this done by tonight.

“What are you going to do?” she asks.

“I need to finish this,” I say.

“Do it tomorrow?”

“I can’t. We’re going to the bar for lunch. My dad’s retirement dinner is at six. I won’t have time.”

“Well then I’m leaving,” she says, like this is a threat. But it isn’t. I’ll actually work better with her gone, without her walking around the house, opening beers and disrupting my recording. She leaves, and I put on my noise-canceling headphones, fire up my computer, and load up my tracks. I close the blinds.

I watch the scene I just described, the fight between Will and Skylar, to bring me back into the mood of the story. I begin most working days reading what I described the day before, and typically, I do the first scene of the film last, and record it only once I’ve described everything else that’s happened. I need to finish this movie, though, because I know Gretchen, and I know she’s going to come back drunk in a few hours, pissed. I know that we’ll probably get into it, that she’ll call me a dick, and that maybe I’m being dick. But I *have* to work. I have to get this done, it’s what pays for this apartment, for the groceries I buy for us, for the gas that goes into the truck, her cigarettes, nights we go out, it’s all coming from my pocket. So she can be pissed all she wants, but she’d be more pissed when I tell her we don’t have any money.

I quickly describe the scene where Will confronts his math professor Gerald Lambeau, lighting a mathematical proof on fire. Lambeau runs over and grabs the charred paper, admits that most days he wishes he never met Will, so that he could sleep at night.

I describe a scene where Morgan, played by Casey Affleck, is watching pornos in Ben Affleck's character's mom's room. I find, in a really well written movie, this scene to be a waste of time.

Next I describe a fantastic scene where Will is interviewing for a job with the NSA. It's edited such that it cuts between Will in the interview room, and him in Sean's office, telling Sean the story. Will and Sean discuss soul mates, and Sean tries to get Will to say what it is he wants in life. Will still has his defenses up and says he wants to be a shepherd. The problem is that Will was abandoned by his parents. He was abused by his foster parents. He does not want to commit to anyone because he has a fear of abandonment.

I find Robin Williams to be especially enjoyable to describe in this film. He plays such a wonderful contrast to Matt Damon. He's gentle, but also strong, and has such a calm about him.

Next I describe a scene where Will calls Skylar to say goodbye and can't say *I love you* back when she says that she loves him.

Have I mentioned how much I enjoy the Elliot Smith soundtrack in this film? I watch as Will pushes Skylar away, describe the single tear that falls down her cheek, describe her walking through the airport, down the gate, and onto her plane to California, and I think, I should be better to Gretchen. I watch as these two characters who obviously love one another can't get it

together, and it kills me. It kills me to see them in pain, when they could just be better to each other, Will specifically, and their relationship would work out.

I describe the rest of the movie, save my files twice, then close Garage Band, VLC, and my iPad. I shut down my computer.

In the kitchen, I pour myself a bit of bourbon, and take a seat on the couch. There's a feeling you get when you've described a really good film that's like nothing else. It's the beauty of being part of something larger than yourself, and knowing that the work you've done is going to make people happy. I flip through a Sam Ash catalogue, a music store. I geek out on mixers, MIDI interfaces, and \$400 condenser microphones.

When Gretchen comes home, she's trashed. I'm not surprised, but I do hold out hope that one of these days she'll prove me wrong, that she'll come home sober and ready to talk things out. She has yet to do so. She smells of cigarettes and whiskey.

"Did you have fun?" I ask. She sneers. I can tell she spent the whole walk home getting herself more and more angry. She's got that hundred-yard stare and appears about to cry. I don't even think that she's sad, so much as exhausted from drinking and fighting every night.

"What's wrong?" I ask. Gretchen shakes her head. I wait an uncomfortably long amount of time for her to say something.

"Sometimes I feel like you don't even see that I'm here. It's like I don't exist." When she's drunk like this, there is a chance I can talk her down off the ledge, but I have to step very carefully and resist the urge to argue. She is very good at baiting me into an argument.

“I always believe that you exist. It’s just that I have to work.” I don’t specify that working is what enables me to pay for everything in this apartment, for obvious reasons.

“But you can work whenever you want.”

“Kind of, except when we go to the bar on Sunday, and when we go Birdie’s on Saturday, and when I have my dad’s retirement dinner tomorrow—”

“So that’s the weekend, but why can’t you get your work done during the week? Like when I visit my brother?”

Gretchen’s brother is sixteen, and has cerebral palsy. She spends most afternoons at the nursing home he lives in. Their dad split when her brother was born, and her mother drinks more than she does. Mom’s in and out of jail and rehab and Gretchen’s life, stopping by our apartment every once in a while only to borrow money.

“Listen,” I say, “I get my work done when I can.”

“It’s like you don’t even care about me.”

“Bullshit,” I say, and we’re off to the races.

“Don’t be an asshole.”

“I’m not being an asshole. You’re just drunk and acting the way you always act when you’re drunk, which is shitty.”

“Oh, am I? Am I being shitty? Please, Calvin, tell me more about how shitty I’m being.”

Gretchen stands, cigarettes from pocket, lighter to mouth. She paces the floor between the TV and me, smoking.

“Don’t smoke in here. It’s bad for my voice.”

“I hate you,” she says, which isn’t true.

“Then why don’t you leave?” I ask, which is what she wants me to say. She wants me to get mad and yell and kick her out.

“Fine. I’m leaving.” And now she does what she does so frequently that it has become comical, which is pack up everything she owns. I’m so certain that this is what she’s going to do, that when she starts packing, I laugh. She gives me a cold look.

“This is funny to you?” she asks, except now she’s crying, so I feel like a dick for having just laughed. I shake my head. I begin, half-heartedly, asking her to stay. I know she’s not actually going to leave. It’ll take her twenty minutes to pack everything up, and by then, I’ll have calmed her down. I mean, she has nowhere else to go. She’s not going to drive two hours to her mom’s place. She’s not even allowed at her mom’s place right now. You think she treats her mom any differently than me?

“Come on, please stay,” I say, so bored with the repetition of this fight. The same fight, in the same apartment. The same *fuck yous* and packing up of bags.

“Go to Hell,” she says. I go to the kitchen and pour myself a bit more bourbon, then take my seat on the couch. If I can’t talk her down, another good angle is to just let her burn herself out. She goes to the kitchen and starts throwing groceries into her bag. She knows this’ll piss me off, because I’m the one who does the shopping, and I’m the one who pays for everything, but I keep my mouth shut. She goes to the bathroom and grabs what I think to be her hair dryer, the toothpaste, her toothbrush, and the Listerine.

Then, she goes to the bedroom. When it gets quiet in there I stand, walk down the hall to the room. Gretchen is sitting on the floor, surrounded by her clothes and shoes, crying. It is a pathetic scene. She doesn't look up when I enter the room. I take a seat on the bed next to her.

"Can we stop fighting," I ask. "Please?" She snuffles. I can see that we're moving from the angry part of her drunk to the sad.

"Come lie down with me?"

She gets into bed and lays her head on my chest.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"Me too," I say, even though this is my apartment that I pay for and stock with groceries, even though I'm the one who works and she's the one who's been looking for a job for eight months, even though she's the one who's drunk. I say, *me too*. I don't say, *you're fine*, or *it's okay*, because there's a fifty percent chance she'll take offense to this, and we'll be fighting for another hour.

Gretchen snuffles, blows her nose, and, eventually, falls asleep on my chest. Lying here many nights like this, I've studied the dark circles beneath her eyes, the veins in her forehead, the nicotine stains on her teeth. I ask myself: is this really what I want?

#

We wake at noon the next day and drive up to the bar. Birdie sits with our friends Stuart and Amy. This place is heaven. You can't even see it from the street. Four-hundred-year-old southern live oaks and birds of paradise stretch high into the air. The bar isn't crowded during

the day, and when the weather is nice, it's just great. The bartender, Andy, is a nice kid who works every Sunday.

We order Yuenglings and sandwiches. We talk about the upcoming election, and the lake fucker-upper, and Birdie's husband, who sounds crazy. We talk about the retirement dinner, which is actually at an Italian restaurant across the street. At two, we have to head home to get ready for dinner, so we say goodbye. Gretchen has been sweet to me all day, and I can tell she feels bad about how she acted last night. As we're driving home, she asks me if I'm excited for dinner with my dad.

"Not really," I say. My dad is a jerk.

"It'll be okay," she says.

"I know it'll be okay." It's always okay. It's fine. There are just so many other people I'd rather spend an evening with. And unfortunately, my dad is a charmer. Gretchen loves him. His co-workers love him. It's the reason my mom fell in love with him, I guess, before she found out who he actually is.

Here's a story: when I was ten my dad took the family to New York. We went because my mother really wanted to see *Hello Dolly!* on Broadway. She loved the movie with Barbara Streisand, we must have watched it a hundred times when I was growing up, the costumes, the dancing. She talked about seeing the play nonstop leading up to the trip. This was still when her sight was okay.

Our last day in New York, the day of the play, we rode the ferry out to the Statue of Liberty. That morning, I had seen a billboard for *Toy Story*, which was coming out that night.

My Dad had been joking about going to *Toy Story* instead of *Hello Dolly!* all morning. Although we thought he was only kidding, I could see my mother getting agitated. After circling the Statue of Liberty a few times, and riding up in the little elevator to look out, we started back to the ferry.

“I’ll tell you what,” my Dad said, “let’s have a race. If Calvin makes it back to the ferry first, we’ll see *Toy Story*. If Mom makes it back first,” he said to me, “we’ll go see her play.” At first my mother smiled, thinking he was continuing the joke he had kept up all morning. But then she saw he was serious.

“Go,” Dad yelled. I looked up at my mother to see if she was going to run, to see if my Dad was joking. My mother was looking at my dad in a way that, at the time, I didn’t really understand. Then she handed him her purse.

We took off, my mother in leather sandals, me in Velcro tennis shoes. The ferry was maybe a hundred feet away. We ran past tourists clad in fanny packs and cameras, past guards walking around the statue. I’d never seen my mother try harder for anything. I’d never even seen her run. She ran awkwardly, like a bird. I was laughing, having fun. In my mind, my mom and I were playing together at something.

But the closer we got to the ferry, the more I saw that she wasn’t playing. This wasn’t fun for her. Mom’s right knee was bad, and she winced with each step. She was out of breath. Her face was flushed. People were watching. She ran like hell. I didn’t want to see *Toy Story* that bad. I slowed and let her win.

When we got to the ferry, neither of us was smiling. Mom was all out of breath. My dad walked up, holding her purse, laughing so hard he was crying. I knew there was something wrong in what had just happened, something that I should feel bad about, I just didn't know what it was.

“*Hello Dolly!* it is,” he said.

We saw the play. Afterwards, we took a picture outside the theater. When we got home, my dad hung that picture on the wall in the living room. When we had guests, my dad spoke of the picture as *the time my mother got to see a Broadway show*. He never mentioned what she had to do to get there.

#

When we get home we undress in the bedroom. I feel tired from the food and the two beers I had with lunch.

“Can we shower together?” Gretchen asks, and I say sure. She goes and turns the water on as I look through my closet for what to wear. Gretchen hums from the shower, the low octave of her music pleasant. I lay my blue suit on the bed and go into the bathroom. Once I've showered, dressed, and deodorized, I got to the kitchen for a beer, a little pre-dinner lubrication to make the evening more bearable.

“Have you seen my phone?” Gretchen asks.

“No,” I say.

“Will you text Birdie and see if I left it at the bar?”

“Sure.”

I text Birdie and take a Heineken from the fridge. I sit on the couch and drink my beer. Gretchen looks good in her silky black dress and high heels. She's too skinny, not that she'd ever think so. She comes over and puts her arm over my shoulder and I kiss her.

#

There's a large crowd of my dad's co-workers in the upstairs balcony of Antonio's. Gretchen and I eat at this restaurant every couple weeks. Tonight, there are bottles of wine on the tables, candles placed around the balcony. I greet my dad, tell him congratulations, and take a seat at a table. The waiters bring out appetizers, breadsticks, more wine. I've known most of my dad's coworkers forever, met them on the golf course when I caddied for my dad on weekends as a kid.

We eat and drink. I try to pace Gretchen with the wine, but she goes at it pretty good. She drinks four glasses in about two hours, although in her defense, she is going glass for glass with my dad. She and he get along pretty well.

After we eat, they call for Dad to give a speech.

"Aw, Henry, a speech," Gretchen says, in a voice that seems too intimate for her talking to my dad. He smiles at her. He looks out at the crowd, regally, he probably imagines.

"First, let me just say that I appreciate you all coming tonight. This is a big night, and I can't say how close I've gotten to so many of you over these last thirty-one years, and how supportive you've been. My son, come here, Calvin, stand up." He gestures with his wine glass for me to join him. Reluctantly, I get up and stand next to my dad at the head of the table.

“As most of you know, Calvin and I have had a rough year. The loss of his mother has weighed heavy on us both. But she would have been proud if she were here tonight. For me, for Calvin.”

“Enough,” I say, beneath my breath.

“What she left us with is absence, a space that cannot be filled.”

I pull away.

“I’m leaving.”

“Please,” my dad says. He’s drunk and pulling at me. I’m just sick of it. I’m sick of all the drinking. I’m sick of Gretchen. I’m sick of my dad. I can’t stand it. I take my dad by his shirt. I grab him, except, it’s really more of a push, a light push. Then, suddenly, he’s falling. Wine sloshes over the rim of his glass and onto his shirt.

I take the stairs down, out of the restaurant, two at a time. I’m halfway across the parking lot before Gretchen catches up to me.

“Stop,” she says, “what was that back there?”

I’m not surprised she’s on his side.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, and I have the overwhelming urge to say, you, and him, and, it’s all just wrong. I turn and face her.

“We have to go back up there,” Gretchen says, looking over her shoulder at the balcony.

“We don’t,” I say, “and I’m not going to. I’m going home.”

“Okay then, let’s go,” she says. For once, she’s on my side. We get into my truck.

“Did Birdie text you back?” I check my phone. There is, indeed, a text from Birdie, saying that she has Gretchen’s phone.

“She has it,” I say, and already I know we’re going to have to stop. Seeing the look on my face, Gretchen says, “I’ll be quick.”

#

I drive us back into Birdie’s neighborhood, to her house, and park on the street. But I leave the truck running, and I don’t get out. Gretchen looks at me like, *seriously, you’re not getting out of the truck?* but I just raise my eyebrows.

“Be right back,” she says.

She walks up to the house and knocks. Birdie answers. Gretchen goes inside. The door is still cracked open but they’re both out of sight. I turn on the radio to wait.

After ten minutes Gretchen still isn’t back, so I shut the truck off and walk up to the house. There’s 80’s music playing inside. I open the door and go in. Voices come muffled from the living room. I walk through the kitchen, into the living room, where Birdie is dancing with Gretchen. At first I’m pissed at Gretchen, but then she shoots me a look, and I see how drunk Birdie is, and realize that Gretchen was dragged in here. I proceed, hesitantly, afraid of getting sucked in.

Birdie flails her arms. Her shirt rides up, revealing a faded tribal tattoo on her lower back.

“Calvin,” she says, as if I’m a Christmas present.

“Hey Birdie,” I say. She hugs me, and I can smell the sweat and gin.

“Dance with me,” she says, lowering her chin and widening her eyes. Gretchen smiles. I take my shoes off, Birdie cranks to the stereo up, and we begin to dance. We listen to KC & the Sunshine Band, Michael Jackson, Queen, Blondie, and Rick Springfield. We all bob our heads and shuffle around the room, until Birdie’s husband comes in and turns the stereo off.

I forgot he got back into town last night. He’s a short, muscular man and he looks fed up.

“Who are you?” he asks.

“Calvin and Gretchen,” I say.

“Calvin and Gretchen, you need to leave,” he says.

I sit on the couch and put my shoes back on. We do need to leave. I can see, in Birdie’s husband, the same frustration I often have over Gretchen. The loss of control, or just, being so out of sync. A lack of agreement on what we want from the world.

“Come on, a few more songs, please, Tom?” Birdie asks.

“No,” Todd says. “No more.”

“Please,” Birdie says.

“We’ll just go,” I say.

“No, you can stay, Calvin,” Birdie says. “It’s Todd who should go.” Todd looks at us, at Birdie.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he says. “Where would I go? What are you talking about?”

“I want you to leave. Now!” Birdie screams.

The silence that follows is heavy. Birdie goes to the stereo and turns the music back on: Men at Work’s “Who Can It Be Now.” Todd quickly turns it off. Birdie gets it back on. Like

children, they slap one another's hands away, grabbing wrists and arms, the volume of the music jumping up and down. Birdie starts slapping at Tom, glancing his face, landing weak blows on his chest. The music is all the way up.

Gretchen and I are going to leave, but then, Todd throws Birdie to the ground. Something in me snaps. I walk toward Tom, who is shouting something at Birdie (though I can't hear anything over the music). I grab him by his shirt and drive my fist into his cheek. His jaw is satisfyingly solid. He stumbles into the sound system, sending the iPod to the floor, where it skids across the room. Wanting to keep the advantage in this fight, I take Todd by the shirt again—his poor, stretched, white undershirt—and drive him back into the sliding glass doors. Surprisingly, the glass doesn't break.

“Calvin, no,” Birdie is saying, still sitting on the floor, as if I were a bad dog.

Todd shakes his head. I'm ready. I'm ready for whatever is going to happen next. The veins in Tom's neck are bulging, his face is red. He steps toward me, and I don't step back.

“Listen, I don't know you, man. I don't want to fight with you. We'll leave,” I say.

Todd's breathing is heavy, his eyes watery.

He begins to hit himself. One fist, then the other, slamming into his face. He punches himself in the eyes, the mouth, the nose. I want to turn away, but don't. An uppercut glances his jaw, another splits his lip. Blood leaks from his nose.

I take a step back.

When he's finished, his hands are shaking. He's looking at me, and I bet if he wanted to kill me right now, he could. Gretchen and Birdie's faces are riveted in horror.

“I’m sorry,” I say, and take another step back, then another. I am standing next to Gretchen, whose hand I take in my own. Birdie holds Todd by the ankle, as if this will keep him still. Todd’s chest rises and falls with his breath, and blood drips down his chin onto the carpet. Gretchen and I back away, open the front door, and slip out.

## MELVIN'S SUICIDE WARD FOR THE DECEASED

I often find myself in the chapel, in the middle of the night, playing through Chopin's nocturnes. My mother taught me to play the piano, like her mother before her. But I disliked my lessons. At the time, I also disliked my mother for forcing me to learn the piano and for forcing me to practice. I hated practicing. I was five when my piano lessons began and already I dreamt of a life lived without practice, of doing only what I found myself to be naturally good at, because I was sure that I would one day discover I was naturally good at something.

My mother loved the piano. The way her face tightened as she trudged through a difficult Bach Aria. The way her eyes always lit up when she finished a piece, smiling at me as if to say, *see, look how beautiful it can be when you play it right*. I've often thought that my mother only wanted me to learn the piano so that I might experience the same joy she felt. If this occurred to me as a child, though of course it never did, I would have shown more interest in the piano, and would have been more thankful for my mother's teaching. Finding pleasure in music was something I could have easily given her. But of course, we know so little as children, and it's really only through having children of our own that we begin to learn the cruelty and selfishness we were so guilty of and oblivious to then.

But my mother was not always happy. My depression, genetic, came from her. And the longer I lived the greater respect I developed for my mother, who stuck it out, who raised my brother and me.

I really shouldn't be in the chapel this late, really shouldn't even be outside the ward, outside my room, awake. I should be sleeping, so that I can focus, tomorrow, and every other day, on getting better. At least, that's what Melvin would say. But I can't sleep. In fact, I've hardly slept at all in the two years I've been in Hell. And now, perhaps ironically (when I think back on my fight against my early lessons), playing the piano is the only thing that soothes me. It brings me back to the house on Clinton Street I shared with my husband, Will, and my son, Bryce, back when I was alive.

I used to play Chopin for Bryce. Even as a baby he was so excited by music, the notes, and loved to slam his little hands against the keys. It made me wonder if some time as a child, before memory, I too sat on a piano bench next to my mother and slapped the keys with joy. By the time Bryce was three, he could sit up on the bench next to me, and would watch as I played.

Since it is night here, I imagine it is night on earth, also. My husband, Will, who will forever be forty-six in my mind, tucks Bryce into bed. I imagine I am playing Bryce to sleep. His room is decorated the way I decorated it, a dinosaur poster on one wall, dinosaur sheets, his dinosaur toys strewn on the floor. Five was the year of dinosaurs. I play Chopin's second nocturne for Bryce, who looks so peaceful drifting off to sleep, his blue dinosaur blanket pulled up to his chin.

I move onto Chopin's third, which I play for Will. It's slightly more playful, more complicated. There's something solid in the way Chopin jumps off a C and lands on a G, the higher register like ice on the tips of my fingers, the keys firmer than human flesh.

I close my eyes and feel the notes. I picture Will in bed. I wonder what frightens him these days, now that he no longer worries about me. Where does he go when he falls asleep, and how might I make my way to that place? If we could somehow find each other there, slipping through cracks to reach each other, loopholes in life's contract, bridged or usurped by dreams. Hoping only for the warmth of his breath on my forehead, or the smell of his skin, the memory of a touch I might carry through the length of my days here until I sleep, and in sleeping, fight my way back to him again.

I open my eyes, and am back in the chapel, at the piano. Jesus hangs on the cross, lit in soft light, blood trickling down his body. Something, maybe it's the lighting, the glow cast, has him always passing, always dying, but never dead. Eternal sufferer. Gentle pilgrim.

I close the lid to the piano, and blow out my candle. I turn the lights off except for the one pointing at Jesus, lock the door behind me (with the key I was given when I began working under Father Joseph), and shut the door. It's a cool night in Hell, and I can see, over the brick wall that surrounds the ward, the buildings uptown. I walk across the lawn, taking the wider route that won't trigger the safety lights. Then, down the stairs to the basement, to the door I propped open with a rock.

The chairs, which will be in a circle for our group meeting tomorrow, are folded up and leaned against one wall. The table where the coffee and croissants will be is bare now, except for a tablecloth. I slip my shoes off and walk across the cool cement of the basement, open the door to the ward, and climb the wooden stairs up to the main floor. If someone were to catch me, there'd be no way to explain my walking around fully clothed in the middle of the night,

especially when I shouldn't even be outside my room. But the overnight guard tends to stay near the cafeteria. He has a love for the cinnamon rolls that Mandy bakes every other morning.

And anyway, Melvin, the ex-community college therapist who runs this ward, likes me. Maybe it's because we're the same age, early forties. Maybe it's because we're both from Florida. Or maybe he's just happy to have a piano player for a while. Father Joseph's services would be a bit dull without music.

My room is number four. There are eight rooms on the first floor, and three floors in the building. This ward was built in the 60's, and is in desperate need of renovation. The tile floors are chipped. The walls are concrete block, thick with many coats of paint. A Methodist minister and her husband ran the place before Melvin. They held services in the basement until they were able to build the chapel. But then they moved on, left the house and chapel to God, who subleases it to the devil, who rents it out to Melvin for a fair price.

#

We're all here because we committed suicide while we were alive. Discovering Hell not only exists, but that all those who kill themselves do actually wind up here, doesn't cheer anyone up. Now, we focus on recovery, though many of us have attempted suicide again.

When the deceased die again the body reappears, soul intact, at the gates of Hell, and the deceased have to go through processing all over again. Except now they're not an Entry but a Re-Entry, and that requires a whole different set of forms. Melvin has to drive down to processing and specify the C.O.D.A. (Cause of Death, Again) and there's a wait time of about

five to six weeks before the paperwork goes through, if you've made no mistakes. The deceased wait in bureaucratic limbo that's just a pain in the ass for everyone involved.

The only way to truly "die" in Hell is to kill the brain but not the body. Dying will just bring you back again.

#

Even in Hell, people hate Mondays. The morale around the ward is low as we all shuffle from breakfast to full group therapy. Maybe we're feeling down because Lorenzo tries to kill himself every Monday, and we're all waiting for it, anxious for him to get it over with.

Full group therapy takes place in the basement. There are other wards like this, and whole cities of buildings out there. Hell's population is seven billion and growing, so naturally, infrastructure is needed. One day, if we recover, we might get the chance to exist in the rest of Hell. We'll get better, move out of here, find houses. I've been looking through brochures for various gated communities (you can only imagine the low lives that live here) and some of them look nice. Hell has a lot of neighborhoods, some with lawns, though the grass is mostly dead (it's too hot). From above, Hell looks a lot like Phoenix.

The problem with Hell is that you spend eternity here and you have no pictures of your family, only your memories, and eventually those begin to fade. I've been told everyone in Heaven gets an iPad, and are able to watch their living family members—spouses trimming their begonias, children marrying, getting promotions, the birth of grandchildren, eventually grandchildren graduating from college, and so on. Nothing like that here, just the twenty-four-inch Toshiba in the common room.

Full group therapy isn't so bad, except it takes forever, since all three floors of the ward are involved. The first floor—where I live—is the in-patient floor. We should be out of the ward in eighteen months. I see that Thom is back. He looks ill, even for a dead man. When you kill yourself in Hell your soul returns at the age you were when you actually died, your body in the shape it was in when you died. So Thom comes back skinny, pale, and clean-shaven.

“Let's everyone welcome back Thom,” Melvin says, and everyone applauds for Thom who doesn't look up from the floor. He's got on tight black jeans and Converse, a gray t-shirt.

We do a check-in, where we all go around and say how we're doing. Amanda's sobbing. She's always sobbing. In my head, I'm saying *shut up, shut up, shut up*. Always crying. Always falling to pieces. She's pretty much the worst part of hell.

“Now, Mandy,” Melvin says. “Let's breathe.”

Melvin breathes with Amanda. She takes quick, wispy breaths that cause her stomach rolls to bunch.

“How about you, Harold? How are you?” Melvin asks.

Harold's a twitcher. Forty, gunshot wound to the chest.

“No Attempts, so that's saying something,” Harold says, despite Amanda's sobbing, which has grown louder.

“Very good, Harold. Who else? Charles?”

Full group therapy can be a bit like pulling teeth. No one wants to speak.

Charles shifts in his chair. He's soft-spoken, mostly because he's had so much ECT. It seems like, at one point, Charles was so smart. They've just dulled the whole vehicle. He's no longer smart or dumb. He feels nothing.

"Things were okay this week," Charles says, slowly, as if this pains him. And I think it has, just saying this little bit.

#

Thom comes to my room after full group. I'm sitting on the bench below the bay window, smoking. Everyone smokes like crazy here because why not?

"Welcome back," I say.

"Thanks," he says.

"You want a cup of tea?" I ask.

"Sure," he says. I turn the kettle on and take two mugs from the cabinet. Our rooms are small, enough space for a bed, dresser, and chair. It's always so cold. We wrap ourselves in thick Irish sweaters and wool socks. Thom sits next to me on the bench below the window. Steam rises from our cups. He lights a cigarette as well.

I'm thinking about Thom's attempt. Why he did it. I remember how my life was a mess. Crying. Not getting out of bed. Flashes of happiness, then silly things would bring me to tears, such as watermelon at the supermarket, their solid green rinds. Sliced open, on display: the red, wet, juicy fruit pulpy and bright in the florescent light. I walked to it weeping and ran my fingers over the cellophane. How perfect and tender and absurd, a watermelon. That such a thing could exist in the world, in the same world that I existed in. That it could be so sound when I was

barely able to make it to the store, to hold myself together long enough to buy tea and wine and cigarettes.

I sip my tea.

“I have something to show you,” Thom says.

We go to Thom’s room— bookshelves built into his walls, a trunk at the foot of his bed. It feels as if he’s just gone off to boarding school, or something. I know he’s a little older, early twenties probably, but he seems so young to me.

“Well?” I say.

Thom peeks into the hall, then shuts his door. Closing our doors is not allowed. He unlocks his trunk, quickly, and takes out something wrapped in soft fabric. Standing close to me, he unfolds the fabric and shows me the gun, which has stained the folds of rag with oil. Guns are definitely not allowed.

“Where did you get that?” I whisper.

“Outside. When I was going through reprocessed. I set it up beforehand.”

Apparently someone owed Thom a favor.

“Can I hold it?” I ask.

Thom looks at me, almost as if he’s not sure that if he gives me the gun he trusts me to give it back. Then he hands me the gun. It is surprisingly heavy. The barrel long and awkward.

“How does it work?” I ask.

“Not now,” Thom says, taking the gun back from me, wrapping it in the cloth, and burying it again in the trunk. He locks the trunk back, then opens his door, peeks out into the hall to be sure no one is snooping around.

“Don’t say a word to anyone,” he says.

“Of course,” I say. “Just promise you’ll show me how to use it.”

#

We all have jobs around the ward, and mine is working in the chapel. Yes, there is a chapel here. People become religious when they get to Hell, since there’s no denying the facts. I help Father Joseph by cleaning and organizing. He’s a nice old man. He doesn’t live in Hell, just works here. Like teaching at an inner city school, he says. He gives the service on Sunday, and some of us attend. Though, some people’s relationship with God hasn’t gotten better since they became residents here.

“Afternoon, Father,” I say when I enter the chapel.

“Good afternoon, Lily. How are you?”

“Fine,” I say.

I go to the office which is a mess of papers, bibles, hymnals, drafts of sermons. I’ve been going through old hymns kept in one of the file cabinets. Some are handwritten. Some are typed. They date back hundreds of years.

*I hear the Savior say, “Thy strength indeed is small,  
Child of weakness, watch and pray, Find in Me thine all in all.”*

*Peace, troubled soul, thou need’st not fear;  
Thy great Provider still is near;*

*Who fed thee last, will feed thee still:  
Be calm, and sink into His will.*

*I'd stay in the garden with Him  
Though the night around me be falling,  
But He bids me go; through the voice of woe  
His voice to me is calling.*

If the music looks easy enough for me, I sometimes play through these songs. If not, I might write a little something of my own. But today I am too distracted. The oil from the gun is on my hands, and the feel of it, its smell overwhelms me. I put the hymns away and walk into the main room.

“Short visit,” Father Joseph says. “Is something troubling you, Lily?”

I feel as though the Father is someone I can talk to.

“I’m not sure I can live, er, stay here,” I say.

“You don’t mean this chapel,” he says.

“Right. Here, in general. In Hell,” I say.

“What other choice do you have, my dear?”

I look into the Father’s eyes, wrinkled at their edges.

“What other choice do I have?” I ask.

I take a seat on the pew next to him.

“We’ve discussed this before.”

“Let’s discuss it again. Does anyone ever get to go, up there,” I say, looking at the ceiling of the chapel. The Father wrings his hands.

“Lily, the rules do not change.”

“Yes, but, well, you could talk to someone. Put in a good word. I’ve done good work—”

“You’ve done fine work here, but I’m afraid, no. It simply doesn’t work that way.”

I stand, and rest my hand on the Father’s shoulder.

“I just figured I’d ask again.”

I walk down the aisle, toward Jesus, toward the exit.

“Lily,” the Father says. “You cannot question His plan. He has a plan. I promise.”

“Well, thank you, Father. But I have a plan of my own.”

I walk out of the chapel, around the ward, to the farthest edge of the property. There’s a tree here that I like to climb. The bark is rough against my skin. It feels good to use my muscles, and soon, I’m twenty feet off the ground, pulling myself higher and higher until I’m sitting on a thick branch. I could climb higher and jump. I could probably make it over the wall, and escape. But what I’m here for is the view.

From this tree I can see all the souls that are, right now, rushing into Hell. They come streaming in continually, infinitely, from all angles, without organization, chaotic like meteors. Lit up green and blue and white, they move so slowly their movement is nearly imperceptible.

#

The next morning I have one-on-one counseling with Melvin. We meet in his office on the third floor.

“How are things going?” he asks.

“Fine.”

“Have you had any more feelings of anxiety recently? Any panic attacks?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t feel like anxiety, so much.”

“Describe what you feel.”

“I’m doing something—watching TV, playing cards, whatever. All the sudden, I remember something that happened. Sometimes it’s a time I embarrassed myself. Or just some moment. I’ve done something wrong. Even something slight. I’m on a bus and I don’t stand for a woman twice my age. Or my son and his friend are playing a game. I help my son win. Secretly, of course. Neither child knows.

“Or parties. Dinner parties with my husband, our friends, or worse, his co-workers. I never liked those people. But we’re standing in the living room of our old house, and I’m talking to them. No matter what I say, I can’t stand the sound of myself saying it. I leave, excuse myself to the kitchen, but then later, in my memory, I overhear them talking—”

“Who?”

“One of our friends. One of my husband’s co-workers. Talking about me. They’re in the kitchen, or in the hall, or sometimes I imagine they’re driving home. Maybe it’s my husband’s co-worker in bed with his wife later, before they fall sleep. And they talk about me.”

“You worry that people talk about you behind your back?”

“No. I worry about what people say about me *when* they talk about me behind my back. I’m convinced they say awful things. The same things I’ve been worried about, they know about. *I saw her on the bus the other day. This ninety-year-old woman got on, and she didn’t even stand. In the park, she helped her son win hide and seek. Who does that?*”

“How do they know? It doesn’t matter. Because of course they know. And they’re right to hate me for it, to speak cruelly of me. I go from one guest to the next to the next in my mind, and all of them, on their drive home, on the subway, in their beds, they’re talking about me. People can’t stand me. I never want to see them again. What sort of idiot was I to have them over at all anyways? When I know deep down I disgust them. That they put up with me only because they pity me.”

“Do you feel as though people are like that here?” Melvin asks.

“It’s how all people are everywhere. Although, of course it isn’t. People like me, I know that. I’m not a bad person. I just convince myself that it is the way I said. That they are all talking about me all the time. I’m narcissistic. Delusional. Right? Thinking that people might actually spend their time thinking about me. It’s all in my head. But it isn’t anxiety, so much. It’s this permanent irrational feeling that everyone I know, yourself included, is disgusted with me on such a profoundly, deeply personal level, that it’s impossible to continue being a person. I don’t feel anxious over it. It feels so much more like *despair*, I guess, if I had to say, if it felt like anything. Is that right? Despair?”

#

The next morning is church. I get to the chapel a bit early and warm up. I have two songs to play, one while everyone is walking in, and one at the end of the service. I begin to play as people filter in. When everyone is seated, I stop. Father Joseph begins his service. When it’s time, I play my second song. Afterward, there are refreshments.

#

I go back to my room after the service. I just want to be alone. No Melvin, no Thom, no Father Joseph. But then Thom comes rushing in.

“What is it?” I ask.

He looks over his shoulder.

“Here,” he says.

He hands me the gun in its soft cloth wrapping.

“I guess Mandy was looking through my window. I had it out, cleaning it. Just for a second. But she’s going to tell Melvin now. I wasn’t here.”

Thom rushes out of the room, leaving me with the gun. I put it beneath my pillow. Sit on my bed. Act natural. I can hear the nurses and Melvin coming down the hall. They rush into Thom’s room next door.

“Where is it?” Melvin asks.

I cringe as they tear the place apart, but I don’t get up from the bed. Thom is led away, upstairs I’m guessing, to solitary confinement. The search continues.

When things have quieted down I go to the doorway, look out into the hall. I peer into Thom’s room, which has been turned upside down.

#

I wait until dark. Then I tuck the gun into my sweater and creep over to the chapel. The sprinklers are on and the grass is wet beneath my feet as I run. I sit in the first pew, close to the statue of Jesus. But then, I’m not sure what I’m waiting for. Some sign. Some message from someone to tell me what to do.

Melvin opens the chapel door. I quickly hide the gun in my sweater.

“Hello Lily,” he says.

“Melvin.”

I’m going to be in big trouble no matter what, and more if he knows I have the gun.

“A little late isn’t it?” he asks, walking to me. “I was awake, in my office, and saw you running across the lawn.”

He sits next to me on the pew. I can smell the coffee on his breath.

“Is there something you want to tell me?” he asks. “Something bothering you?”

There’s nothing I want to tell him, and everything is bothering me. I can feel tears welling up but will them back. But what’s the use?

“I’m sorry,” I say, and take the gun from my sweater and hand it to him. He doesn’t have to unfold the cloth to know what it is.

“What were you going to do with this, if you didn’t give it to me?” he asks.

What would I have done? Would I have done it? I say nothing.

Melvin leads me from the chapel back into the ward, up to the third floor. It’s quiet and dark in the halls, and I feel like tip-toeing. I’m led to one of the medical rooms, and Melvin calls a nurse. She comes in, pinning her hair up, still straightening her white uniform. She’s pretty, even rubbing sleep from her eyes.

They explain that I’m going to have one session of ECT tonight, then one each week for as long as it takes, and that Thom’s session was very successful earlier. The nurse wraps the leather straps around my wrists and ankles. They are smooth and worn.

The nurse explains the process, but I'm not listening. I can't focus on this. I know that, with each ECT session, my memory is going to fade, and fade, until there will be nothing left of Will and Bryce.

I focus, instead, on a summer afternoon when we went to the springs near our house. Bryce was two. He crawled on the blanket next to Will, beneath the canopy of southern live oaks, clumps of Spanish moss like last year's tinsel in the branches.

Swimming was one of the things that made me feel good, the water so clear and cool. I swam out to the center of the spring, the sun beating down from above. I floated on my back, treading water, and was chilled down to my bones.

They've hooked all the stuff up. Melvin gestures toward the dials. I nod my head. I close my eyes. I try not to listen as the machine starts clicking.

I remember floating on my back, letting myself sink down into the cool water. Letting it swallow me. Down below the surface, I opened my eyes, and watched the light break apart, shattering into beams. I thought I could live there forever. Except that I was a mother now. I had to go back.

Surfacing, breathing, my husband—on the shore with Bryce—waved to me and I to him. I tread water, savoring my own buoyancy, before returning to them once more.

## HONEYMOONERS

It's been a wild year. Things have moved quickly, and I feel like I'm still sorting it all out.

What happened? Let me tell you. For one, my marriage to Bruce ended, though it had been “ending” for quite some time. Blah, blah, blah. Bruce is old news. My new year's resolution, when we got divorced, was, don't waste any more time thinking about Bruce. We'd been married for ten years (I was his second wife, and a bit of a late bloomer myself) and now I wasn't going to waste another second thinking about Bruce. We divorced last July, so it wasn't exactly a “new year's” resolution, but who cares. Besides, it was more important than a new year's resolution. Be gone Bruce, let bygones be bygones, and don't let the bougainvillea hit ya on the way out-- it was a new life resolution, and unlike some other, prior resolutions—stop dying my hair, care less about what people think of me, have more sex—it was a resolution I was going to keep.

I turned sixty this year, in November. We'll move quickly past that one. And, we've arrived at primo facto numero uno—I met Gary this year, in January. It was love at first sight, which is saying something, because I looked through a lot of eHarmony profiles. We dated January through April, he proposed on the first, I thought it was a joke, it wasn't, I have the ring to prove it, and were married two weeks ago, July first. So, and I'm not thinking about Bruce, because I've already said no more thinking about Bruce, but if I were thinking about Bruce, I would think, Bruce, how about them apples? Less than a year and I'm already married, and to a man who doesn't find me *stuffy*, whatever that means.

Which, please, I'm not stuffy, have never been stuffy, just look at me. Ask yourself, would a stuffy woman marry a man she met online, who she's known six months, then agree to ride all around the country with him in an RV? Would a stuffy woman agree to go to Florida, in the summer, during what we've now found out is hurricane season? Would she split a bottle of wine with said husband at dinner and then, strolling along the beach, walk him down to the end of the pier, after sunset, and have sex with him with the waves crashing below and the mid-July ocean breeze salty over sweaty and sun drenched skin, with who knows how many tourists up there in hotel rooms looking out at the Atlantic? I'll tell you where you can shove *stuffy*, Bruce.

Have things been breezy, not exactly. There was the business of selling my house in this upside down market, and having to take far less for it than it was worth. There was cramming sixty years of accumulated junk into my half of the RV. And there's been the weird tension that I've never experienced before, that started up about the time we drove south of the Bible Belt, which is that some folks still look at an interracial couple as if they know the exact spot in hell that has been reserved for us.

Now, I've got no problem with the church, happen to be a recovering Catholic (from a family who is as Irish Catholic as the day is long) but find it hard to believe that in all the chaos of the world we live in today, God has time to worry about old Kathy Campbell marrying a black man.

Currently, we're in St. Augustine. I'm considering our around-the-country drive a honeymoon, just one that's going to extend for quite some time. End of honeymoon: TBA. When we get bored of driving, and sight seeing, we'll settle down someplace.

The problem facing our week in St. Augustine—the oldest city in America, and home to the fort Castillo de San Marcos—is that it’s raining, and it’s going to keep raining, because Hurricane Karl is just south of Florida. It was my idea to come to St. Augustine, and it’s my idea to wait out the storm. Karl is expected to veer west and fizzle out over the Gulf of Mexico, but she’s still going to throw a good deal of rain our way. Thunder rumbles in the distance. I’ve been through storms. But something about this one makes me nervous. Maybe it’s just the RV. In a house, there’s always the option to close the door to the windowless bathroom, to lie in the tub on a mattress of couch cushions, listening to the weather reports from the battery-powered radio. There’s no such security in the RV, which could easily be ripped from the ground.

Gary comes out of the bathroom wearing slacks and loafers, a golf shirt. I go to the closet and put on the burgundy cardigan that belonged to Gary’s late wife Megan. I’ve been wearing it. Its buttons are worn wood, its pockets lined with silk. Gary has turned on the news when I come back into the living room, the weatherman in front of his map of Florida, the storm’s mass rotating a half-turn again and again over the Keys.

“Sounds like it’s going to miss us,” he says.

“They always do,” I say. “You’re wearing *those* to dinner?” Gary looks down at his loafers.

“You bet,” he says, raising his skinny right leg, argyle sock exposed, brandishing the crocodile skin loafer. I gather my things from the table into my purse.

“How many crocodiles you think they killed to make them?” I ask.

“Well,” Gary says, “if he was a big-un, I’d say one. Although I have always had the thought that maybe they killed two *baby* crocodiles, one for each loafer, you know?”

“Maybe the mother was made into pants?”

“Briefcase, hat, perhaps a wallet. For enough money, I could have gotten a whole suit, I imagine.”

“How modest of you to settle for the shoes.”

#

We run from our RV to our Smart Car. The rain comes down in heavy drops. It’s only four p.m. but it’s dark. The rain rushes over my boots, and makes veins in the campsite’s sand. Wind whips the tops of the palm trees.

Gary drives the two-lane road carefully, the GPS guiding us. It rains harder and he ups the windshield wipers from *fast* to *desperate*. NPR talks about *Hurricane Karl this, Hurricane Karl that*, and I wonder: why must we name our disasters?

#

What I didn’t know was that Kyle’s Fish House has specials on all domestic drafts, almost all domestic bottles, and almost all of their customers take advantage of these specials every Friday night. This morning, I searched Yelp for the best, fresh seafood in St. Augustine, but as we walk into Kyle’s I’m thinking this can’t be the place. Before Gary and I can discuss where else we might eat, a waitress in cut-off shorts, a tight tank top, and crocs is waving us over to an empty booth. Looking around for someone to send in our place, but finding no one, we reluctantly walk toward her.

There are peanut shells on the floor. The tables are coated in thick epoxy that seems to encourage spills. I count eleven flat screens above the bar alone.

Gary asks the waitress for a table in *the quieter part* of the restaurant.

“What?” she yells, over the sound of a sports announcer announcing *a horrible call on the part of Mendoza*.

“Can we sit in a quieter part of the restaurant,” I yell. The hostess nods like *sure* and leads us to a booth in the back. The lampshades above the table are green. Our Diet Cokes come in red, plastic 32 oz. Coca-Cola glasses. And there is no joy in Mudville as Mendoza makes one bad call after another, receiving much scorn from these die-hard Marlins fans.

“So, we’ll go to the fort tomorrow,” I say, rolling the white wrapper of my straw between my fingers.

“If the rain lets up,” Gary says.

“It’s not so bad.”

“How does this compare to your first honeymoon?” Gary asks. My first honeymoon was with Bruce, who, bless his heart, went all out: Hawaii, private cabana, massages, snorkeling, the whole deal. Dammit, I wish Bruce hadn’t been so good to me. Bruce had been good. He had been better than good. Bruce had been great. Why, then, had I not loved Bruce? Or, *come* to love Bruce, as was my plan when marrying him. Had that been the best plan in the world? No. But I’d learned my lesson.

“This is worlds better,” I say.

“Why?” Gary asks.

“Because I didn’t love Bruce.”

“And you love me?”

“Of course,” I say.

The waitress, Kimberly, comes over with the Seafood Platters we ordered per her recommendation. The oysters are battered, fried and served with a sauce; the shrimp are battered, fried and served with a sauce; and the muscles of this poor woman’s arms strain with the weight of the platters as she sets them steaming onto the table.

“Can I get you folks anything else?” Kimberly asks.

“No, thank you,” Gary says. Kimberly walks away, her hips slaloming back and forth, her body toned and young. I don’t miss youth, or envy it. I wouldn’t go back to being young if you paid me.

“Tell me about when you and Megan were here,” I ask.

“Well,” Gary says, sighing, “It was a much different place then. Fewer people. Fewer *tourists*. We played volleyball on the beach.”

“You and Megan?” I asked.

“Yes,” Gary said, staring down at the table and smiling.

“We were always together. It was wonderful.”

That’s nice. That’s sweet.

“I never really thought I’d find anyone else after Bruce,” I say.

“Well, now you have.”

#

The drive home is slow going through the heavy rain, but we make it. No news about the storm on NPR. Gary closes the curtains on all the windows in the RV. There are quite a few curtains, since there are quite a few windows. I change into my nightgown. The rain on the roof, the wind through the trees, and the distant thunder, are constant.

“I’ve battened down the hatches,” Gary says.

“Good. Now come to bed.”

Gary slips his feet out of his loafers, unbuckles his belt. I undo the buttons on my nightgown. Gary turns the light off and climbs into bed.

Here’s another thing you need to know: sometimes, Gary slips up and calls me Megan during sex.

At first, I was angry. But then it kept happening, and Gary’s apology afterward was weaker each time. Now, we’re in a weird place, where I don’t mind it so much. Because the love Gary had for Megan was so strong. And I don’t know that he’ll ever love me that much. I don’t know that I’m as lovable as she was. So I don’t mind that Gary’s love comes prepackaged.

#

By morning, the storm is worse. I take my time brewing coffee in the kitchen, listening to the news reports on TV. The storm is still a good ways south, hovering around Port St. Lucie. Wind blows the palm trees outside the RV like crazy. Water pools in the grass around our campsite. The rain beats down into the puddles. Gary comes into the kitchen wearing his Hugh Hefner robe.

“Fort’s out,” Gary says.

“We have rain gear,” I say.

“You wanna go in this?”

“Come on, live a little.”

I want to go the fort. I want to go the main drag and see the schoolhouse. I want to eat some fudge, and drink sangria, and go to the beach. I want to do it all. I convince Gary to go.

We take our time dressing: North Face jackets and rain pants. We walk from the RV to the car, the rain beating down on our rain gear, my hood pulled tight over my face. I can feel the rain pelting down against my back as Gary struggles to unlock the car. It’s pleasant feeling the rain but not getting wet. I get in and close the door behind me.

“It’s really coming down,” I say.

#

Driving into town the flags outside Flagler College blow like hell in the wind. We drive along the ocean, which is rough, white caps breaking, foam all over the shore. A lone red flag, rising from the lifeguard’s tower, whips in the wind. A surfer in a black wetsuit carves a wave.

“This is gonna be fun,” I say. “We’ll see the fort, get some fudge. It’ll be a good time.” Gary is leaned forward over the wheel looking through the heavy rain.

“I don’t even know that the fort will open,” Gary says. “I think a lot of people actually got out of town for this one.”

“For this? No way. It’ll be a tropical storm by this afternoon.”

I mess around with the radio, find a pop song, and bob my head. I sing along. Gary turns the radio off.

“I can’t concentrate,” he says.

“Sorry. I was just trying to lighten things up.”

#

The sign outside the fort reads, “Fort closed due to inclement weather.”

“How do you close a fort?” I ask.

“I guess they raise the drawbridge,” Gary says. This is funny.

“See, you made a joke. Now we’re having fun.”

“I guess so,” Gary says, looking through the windshield, the wipers going, the fort in the distance. It’s a wide, squat fort with little castles at its corner. Right on the ocean. There’s no one around. The land around the fort is grassy.

“Come on,” I say. “Let’s at least get out and walk around it.” Gary looks at me.

“Please?” Gary shuts the car off, takes his umbrella from the back seat and we step out. My boots sink into the sandy ground. The ocean is churning and churning. The rain is a pleasant presence all over my body, against my boots and my hood. I like the way the raindrops sound against the plastic of our rain gear. The wind pulls our clothes tight against us, causes them to flap in the direction of the ocean. It’s like it wants to push us in and swallow us.

We walk toward the fort, across a little wooden bridge. The fort is about twenty feet tall, the walls fashioned from shells. Gary’s umbrella turns inside out. We walk closer, so that the fort blocks the wind. There are divots in the fort’s walls.

“What are these?” I shout.

“Cannonballs,” Gary shouts back, a gust of wind sweeping the rain into our backs and pushing us against the fort’s wall.

“Let’s get out of here,” he says.

#

We head over to the main strip for lunch. Most of the stores are closed. The schoolhouse and the fudge shop, closed. I guess everyone got out of town for the storm. We find a sandwich shop that’s open. Five employees are the only people in the restaurant, all wearing *Ye Olde Sandwich Shoppe* shirts. They’re gathered around the TV above the bar.

“Hello?” I call out, a little help over here, please. On TV the police are leading a guy in handcuffs away from a building.

The image changes, a different building, a different set of police cars. The heading reads “Two Campus Shootings in Same Day.”

“What’s happened?” I ask. One of the waiters turns around.

“Two shootings today.”

“On the same campus?” Gary asks.

“Different campuses.”

“Different campuses?” I ask.

“Different states,” another one of the waiters says.

“Christ,” Gary says. There are two open stools at the bar, so Gary and I sit down. Two waiters and one waitress sit at the bar, beers in front of them. On the other side of the bar, a cook and the bartender, who pours two beers and sets them down in front of Gary and me.

“Thanks,” I say.

“Sure,” the bartender says.

“Are you guys even open?” Gary asks.

“Not really,” the bartender says.

We watch the same clips again and again. One suspect apprehended, the other still on the loose. The news report cuts from the shootings, for a minute, and we get coverage on the storm. It’s been downgraded, again. Thirty mile-an-hour winds. Heavy rainfall for the next twenty-four hours.

“You guys hungry?” the cook asks.

“We’ll take a couple sandwiches, if it’s not too much trouble,” Gary says.

The cook disappears into the kitchen and comes back out with two red plastic baskets lined with wax paper, each filled with a pastrami sandwich, chips, a pickle.

“Thanks,” I say.

The cook sets the food down in front of us.

“No problem.”

The rain comes down steady on the roof.

#

When we leave the sandwich shop at 3:30 it’s already dark. Water rushes down the gutters. I step over a small river as I enter the car. We drive in silence for a minute.

“It’s out of control, isn’t it?” he says.

“The storm isn’t *that* bad.”

“No, the news, the shootings.”

“Oh. Yeah. It is out of control,” I agree.

#

When we get back to the RV, we decide just to go to bed.

I wake, in what feels like the middle of the night, to hail pelting the metal roof. The wind whistles shrilly through the trees. Gary is still asleep, somehow. I put my slippers on and walk timidly into the living room. The RV is dark, though bright flashes of lightning illuminate it. The microwave clock reads 9:30 PM.

I sit on the corner of the couch, on the end farthest from all the windows. Wind is thrown against the side of the RV in wild gusts. The RV’s frame seems to shudder. The hail is crazy against the glass. I think the windows might break. I need to wake Gary. We need to get out of here. Though I don’t even know if we could drive at this point. And anyways, there’s more to do, more to see. The storm will pass.

A crack shoots up the window next to me and I run to the bedroom. I shake Gary by the shoulder.

“Get up, now,” I say.

#

We run from the RV to the car, the water halfway up my shins. It’s middle-of-the-night dark except for the brief flashes of lightning. The ocean seems to be swallowing everything. The palm trees blow forty-five degrees to the left. Hail pelts us in the back. I jump into the car and slam the door behind me, out of breath and frightened.

“Drive,” I say. “Drive now.”

Gary tries to start the car. No luck. He tries again, and this time, we’re in business. We appear to be parked underneath a waterfall.

“Wipers,” I say.

“They’re on,” he says.

He backs out of the campsite, careful not to spin the wheels. Water sloshes against the bottom of the car. Gary navigates the fallen branches, floating coolers, and an overturned canoe, as we make our way to the main road.

We drive into town, looking for somewhere to wait out the storm. There are strip malls, and stand-alone restaurants, but nothing open. A hotel would be great. I’d pay for a room with solid walls right now. I spot a McDonalds. Its windows are boarded up but I see through the glass door that two men sit inside.

“There,” I say.

Gary pulls into the parking lot. It’s still pouring, so we fasten our rain gear tight and make a run for the front door. Locked. I pull and pull on the handle, bang on the glass.

“Let us in,” I shout. The two men inside, one in a McDonalds uniform, the other in plain clothes, just look at us. They’re both in their mid-forties, it seems.

“Let us in,” I yell again. The wind whips up. Our rain gear flutters like crazy. Gary pounds his fist against the door.

“Come on,” he yells. The man in the McDonalds uniform walks over, unlocks the door and opens it a crack.

“We’re closed,” he says. Gary grabs the door handle and pulls, but the man is stronger, and closes the door back and looks at Gary like he’s crossed the line.

“Please!” I yell. “We’ve got this little car. Our RV isn’t safe. Please.”

Gary takes his wallet from his back pocket, and presses a twenty-dollar bill against the wet glass. The man looks at the money.

“Come on,” Gary says. The man shakes his head. Gary takes another twenty from his wallet, and a ten. He holds fifty dollars to the glass.

“We need your help,” Gary says. The other man in the McDonalds says something and the uniformed man’s shoulders sag, his face softens. He unlocks the door and lets us in.

“Thank you,” I say.

We rush in and the man shuts the door behind us. The A/C is out, the lights are dim, but this place still feels like heaven: boards on the windows, a storeroom somewhere in the back I bet we could hide in if we needed to. There’s a TV mounted to one wall and Fox News in on, without the volume.

“I’m Caleb,” the man in the McDonalds uniform says. “That’s Brian,” he says, looking toward the man sitting at the table. Playing cards are scattered on the tabletop.

“Kathy and Gary,” Gary says.

“You guys were camping in this?” Brian asks.

“We were in an RV but the hail broke one of the windows, and the water was rising,” I say. “We got worried.”

“A lot of folks got out of town for the storm,” Caleb says.

“We didn’t think it’d be this bad,” I say.

Gary and I sit down at the table across from Brian, taking napkins from the dispenser to pat ourselves dry. Caleb sighs.

“You all want a burger or something?” he asks, since, I guess, we’re already inside.

“Sure,” I say, smiling at him. And really, I’d love a burger. I’m starving.

“The soda machine’s on,” Brian says. “All you can drink.”

“Not all you can drink,” Caleb says over his shoulder, already walking back to the kitchen.

Brian leans in toward us.

“He’s a little grouchy. Worked a double and then got stuck here. But I say why not just have a party,” Brian says, winking. He pulls a flask from beneath the table and takes a sip.

“Shh,” he says, looking behind us at Caleb in the kitchen.

“You all have TV,” I say.

“Yeah, but he won’t let me switch it off Fox. So I mute it. Compromise.”

“How do you guys know each other?” I ask.

“Brothers,” Brian says. “You all play Euchre?”

“No,” Gary says, looking at me.

“No,” I say.

“Well let me teach you.” Brian explains the rules of the game. It’s a lot like bridge, or other trick-taking card games.

“We’ll be in teams of two. I choose Kathy. I’m sick of my brother, and you look too serious for me, Gary.” Gary smiles.

“Everyone gets five cards.”

Brian deals the cards into four piles.

“And these, are called the kitty,” Brian says, setting the remaining cards in a pile in the center of the table. Caleb comes back from the kitchen and sets trays in front of us with double cheeseburgers, fries, and an apple pie for us both.

“I was just explaining the game,” Brian says.

“I told you I didn’t want to play any games,” Caleb says.

“Well aren’t you Mr. Grumpy? If I have to sit here with you for twelve hours we’re going to play a game. Plus we have guests. Be nice to our guests.”

All the sudden a mug shot comes on the TV. It catches Gary’s and my attention, and Brian and Caleb turn to see what’s going on.

“Turn it up,” I say.

The newscaster explains that they’ve found the man responsible for the second shooting. It appears that he was not working in connection with the shooter at the first school. They’ve got him in questioning. Brian turns the volume down again when the report is over.

“This world is too much sometimes,” Brian says.

I take a big bite of my burger.

“This is why I keep saying they need better security on them campuses,” Caleb says.

“I don’t know about security. We just need better gun control laws,” Gary says.

“Laws won’t do nothin’. People who want to get guns get guns. Criminals don’t listen to laws, that’s why they’re criminals,” Caleb says.

“Well, at least limits on assault weapons, like what they used today. No one gets an automatic rifle for protection,” Gary says.

“It’d protect the hell out of myself with an automatic rifle. Besides,” Caleb says, turning to Gary, “don’t you want as much protection as you can get?” I’m not totally sure, but the way that Caleb is still looking at Gary, I think he’s insinuating that because Gary’s black he needs to protect himself more.

“Be nice,” Brian says.

“I’m just saying guns aren’t the problem. They’ll stab you. They’ll run you over. If they want to kill, they’ll kill you. Plus—”

“Caleb,” Brian says.

“You want to give away your second amendment rights? ‘Cause then they’re going to come along and tell you which religion to believe. Obama, and let’s not pretend he isn’t already, but he’ll bring cruel and unusual punishment to the people.”

“Caleb.”

“Or how about the 13th Amendment? Huh? What then, chief?” Caleb says to Gary.

No one says anything for a minute. Gary and I look down at our food.

“Sorry,” Caleb says.

“Can we play this game?” Brian asks. I look to see if Gary is upset, but he’s keeping his cool. I put my hand on his thigh; push my burger and fries away.

“It’s been a stressful day for all of us,” I say. “Run through the rules again.”

We play six rounds of Euchre, Brian and I winning four of the six. The tension in the room subsides, but not completely. It still feels like something’s going to come busting through one of the windows any second.

When we’re tired of cards, Gary and I go into the play place to take a nap in the ball pit, which is much less comfortable than I hoped for. We sleep, though. When we wake up a few hours later the weather channel is showing the storm out in the Gulf, losing both speed and power. I go the door, open it, and step outside. It’s still sprinkling but the wind has died down and the hail is through. A salty breeze blows from the ocean. The air is cooler and crisp.

“We should check on the RV,” I say to Gary.

“Thank you for letting us stay here,” he says to Caleb and Brian.

“Here,” Brian says, taking from his pocket the money Gary gave him earlier. He unfolds it, pockets the ten, and hands the twenties back to Gary.

“For the burgers and all,” Caleb says.

“Well, thank you,” Gary says.

It takes us a while to get back to camp with so much debris on the road. The streets of St. Augustine are brick and narrow, the gutters overflowing with leaves and trash. At one point we pass a red Mini-Cooper on someone’s balcony, a white rabbit’s foot hanging from its rear view mirror. A tornado must have come through and lifted it up.

The sun rises and by the time we get back to camp it’s light out. We park at our campsite and get out of the car. The RV is washed up against the trees lining our site, on its side. Two of

its four wheels touch the ground. I'm surprised it wasn't sucked out to sea. Most of its windows are cracked. The picnic table that was outside the front door is missing.

"Damn," Gary says.

"It's probably not as bad as it looks," I offer.

I climb in first, into the driver's side. The passenger's side is against the trees, and there's no way to get in over there.

"Be careful," Gary says.

I climb over the wet captain's seats into the living room.

"There's no way for me to get electrocuted, right?" I ask.

"No. The generator is off. We're not plugged into power. But be careful with all the glass."

The skylight bursts. There are deep cracks in the thick glass of the windows. The curtains are off the rod and the sink is filled with sand. Debris is strewn across the floor: wet cereal boxes, a jar of peanut butter, a pair of Gary's underwear.

The lights flicker as Gary attempts to start the engine. It tries but doesn't start.

"There's no way," he says.

It sure doesn't look good. I sit down on the couch and stare at my shoes. So the RV's totaled. The storm came through and wrecked everything. People like Caleb exist. And sometimes my husband calls me by his late wife's name in bed.

But, we have the car. And the storm is gone. Caleb, too. And at least Gary and I have each other. And, thank God, we didn't lose anyone in the shooting. I stand and walk to the front of the RV.

"Come on," I say.

"Where are we going?"

"I don't know, but sitting here is not gonna do us any good."

## SPLENDOR

### 1.

The guests have all come and gone. It's mid-morning. I'm drinking coffee in one of the Adirondack chairs on the lawn between the club and the golf course. This is where we had the reception yesterday. It was a nice wedding between my old friends Peter and Clara here at this Florida country club. My wife, Noel, and I live in Chicago, now, but coming back to Florida is returning home for me. I lived in Central Florida the first eighteen years of my life.

I'm staying an extra day after the wedding to be alone. It's spring, April and warm, and there are sparrows, or finches, I don't know which, flying from one tree to another. Sprinklers water the green beyond.

Noel was diagnosed with Huntington's disease two years ago, and this is the first time she hasn't been able to travel because of it. This is probably the last time I will be able to travel. Her condition is getting worse. Our youngest, Scott, is finishing high school. Once he graduates I'll be taking care of Noel and working part-time from home.

The guests are all gone, but the tables we crowded around yesterday are still on the lawn, bare now, their wooden surfaces exposed. The smell of bacon cooking in the kitchen is faint but lovely. On top of the tables: folding chairs collapsed and stacked five high. The band is gone, the stage is gone—though the grass is flattened in the rectangular outline of it—but a melody remains, one I can't put a name to.

### 2.

I arrived Friday. A big banner hung from the balusters in the lobby: *Congratulations Peter & Clara!* A Persian rug on the floor, stone columns up the walls, and a large, stone reception desk with a tiny young woman seated behind it. I went to my room to change and get ready for dinner. On the desk was a bright pink piece of paper with the itinerary for the weekend. The first of Friday's events was a cocktail hour in the lobby bar at five, followed by supper. I took a shower, put on slacks, a polo, and called home. Scott answered.

"How's it going?" I asked.

"Good, you?"

"Good. Is Mom there?"

"Yeah." If there was ever a dodged bullet it's that neither of the boys have Huntington's. The odds of passing the disease is fifty-fifty. If we had known, seventeen years ago, that Noel was sick, we would have adopted.

I looked over the weekend's itinerary. Drinks and dinner tonight, the wedding in the morning, lunch, reception, dinner, *dancing*. I folded up the pink paper and put it in my shirt pocket.

"She's sleeping."

"All right, I'll try again later."

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"Have fun."

"Thanks."

Three men, a little older than myself, sat at the granite bar top downstairs. I ordered a beer and listened to them talk. After a minute, I said, “You’re here for the wedding?”

They turned. The drunkest one, who sat between the other two, said, “Cheers.”

They raised their glasses and clanked them together.

“Heeeey,” they said, as if it were the dozenth time.

I raised my glass.

“Father of the bride,” the man on the right said, pointing to the man in the center.

“Old friend of the groom,” I said, pointing to my chest.

More clanking.

People started showing up. I talked to a short, muscular guy from Jersey, named Trent, who was an old friend of Clara’s. He seemed wound like a tight spring.

“Adam,” I said, introducing myself, “What do you do for a living, Trent?”

“I work as an EMT,” he said, “so I see a lot of fucked up shit. I see fucked up shit every day. Nasty-ass car crashes, motherfuckers who tried to kill themselves and fucked it up. Or, worse, kill themselves on accident.”

“How?” I asked.

“You know, shoot themselves but end up just blowing off part of their jaw, park the car in the garage but the battery dies and they end up brain-dead but not dead-dead. I get my car serviced every six months. You?”

“Um, I guess like six months, yeah. I’m not totally sure.”

“No, what do you do for a living?”

“Oh, I’m mostly retired. Or, retiring. I’m working from home on a very part-time basis. My wife is sick.”

“Shit, what’s she got?”

“Huntington’s disease. It’s like a mix between ALS, Parkinson’s, and Alzheimer’s. Woody Guthrie had it.”

“That’s rough.”

“Yeah.”

“Refill?”

“Sure,” I said.

While Trent went to the bar, I met a tall, blond real estate agent named Nick, and his wife, Alisha. They were in their early forties and healthy. Nick played a lot of football in high school, some college, and Alisha ran marathons. They would see their kids graduate from college, would celebrate anniversaries: silver, gold, diamond.

Trent returned from the bar. He, Nick, and Alisha met. The four of us. We were a group, a team. We’d ride this wedding out together. It’s how these big functions worked. You got your group, and you stuck together.

We went into the dining room: tall ceiling, wood-paneled walls, white curtains. The silverware was wrapped in cloth napkins and secured with metal rings. Waiters circled with bottles of red wine. The golf course was visible through the big bay windows. We found a table. The dining room was already crowded. Waiters came by and filled our glasses with red or white,

and asked us if we'd like the steak, the chicken, or the vegetarian. Peter and Clara were seated at the other end of the room.

There were about twenty-five small tables in the dining room, all of them filled. It was a pretty scene, everyone in conversation, the light glinting off our silverware and wine glasses. It was a nicer wedding than Noel and I had. But our wedding had its own charm. We got married in the back yard of a friend's house. The house wasn't enormous, but it had a yard big enough for forty people. We married in the fall, when the leaves were changing. We had kegs of beer. A chef friend of ours cooked all the food, and some college buddies of mine were the band. It was great. Peter and Clara were there. More friends showed up for the reception. They brought their dogs, their children, more drinks. The band played late. It felt like we were getting away with something. Normally expensive and worry inducing, we got married for cheap, and it had been *fun*.

After dinner, guests drifted out onto the porch that ran the length of the backside of the club. There were a few tables, and a dozen or so rocking chairs. People sat down, lit cigarettes. The lawn was set up for croquet. Guests took up mallets and knocked the colorful balls around.

There was a portable bar set up on the cusp of the golf course, the bartender freshly shaven except for his thick gray mustache. White lights were strung up between the trees.

An after-dinner cocktail line formed. This wasn't on the schedule, but I'd come with strict instructions from Noel to have fun for the both of us. I spotted Peter.

"Save my spot," I said to Trent. I went over and hugged Peter.

"Dude, I didn't think you were going to make it," Peter said, bringing me in close.

“I said I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Adam!” Clara said warmly. I hugged her as well.

The last time I’d seen them was five, six years ago when they’d visited Noel and me in Chicago. They came over to our house. Peter and I half-watched a football game while we caught up. We listed off old friends, trying to recall what everyone was up to now. And now, here were Peter and Clara, in suit and frilly dress, getting married.

“We’re sorry Noel couldn’t make it,” Clara said.

“She wishes she could have been here. If you ever make it to Chicago, she’d love to see you.”

I felt like I might start crying so I excused myself.

I decided to skip after-dinner cocktails, and walk around the club instead. Employees smiled at me as I passed. Everything was clean and tidy. There were paintings of famous golfers on the walls, tucked-away wine cellars, doors leading to grand hallways that led to who knew where. I went back to my room.

### 3.

At eighteen, I set out to cross the country on motorcycle. No one in my family had gone to college; why should I have been the one to start? The jobs in my small hometown were not the ones I wanted to work, the people, not who I wanted to become. My time in Florida, where I lived the first eighteen years of my life, was over.

I drove west, through Louisiana, across the long, hot expanse of Texas, through the southwest—Santé Fe, Taos, Tucson, Yuma, until, eventually, I hit San Diego: the harbor, and

Balboa Park, and the Pacific Ocean for the first time. I hung a right, drove north through L.A., San Francisco, on up the coast, through the Redwoods in Northern California, and into Oregon.

I was happy in that part of the country, on that road, at that time. On one side of the highway the trees grew dense over hills that rolled up into the Pacific Coast mountain range. To the west stretched long beaches, gray and laden with driftwood. Along the highway, old houses, some long-abandoned, were nestled into the forest, soaked and swollen from the rain, the fog, the spit of the sea. It was quiet there, except for the surf and the wind.

I found a job working at a marina in Wheeler. The ocean broke on the other side of the bay's rim, out of sight. Down at sea level, Highway 101 was above and behind us. Cars *whished* along the wet road, their sound building and fading slowly from and into the distance.

I slept in a tent. I woke early and dressed in the one pair of clothes—jeans and a flannel shirt—I set aside for work. These clothes, I was told, would be thrown away when I finished at the marina because of their smell. I kept them beneath a tarp on the cinder block wall that lined my campsite. In the morning, I removed the tarp, brushed off the spiders, and dressed.

I'd go to the office every morning—charcoal and knit caps for sale—for a cup of coffee. The owner of the marina, Noah, would usually be in there taking reservations. My job was to work the dock: prepping baits and renting boats for the tourists who'd come out from the city to catch crab.

Preparing baits meant opening the plastic containers of delivered fish, large tuna with wet eyes. I decapitated them with a rusty ax, so dull it took four or five blows before their heads came free, my hands and wrists blood-flecked and iridescent. I ran six-inch lengths of steel wire

around each fish's bottom jaw, twisting the steel closed like a bread tie. Small fish and the tuna bodies were stuffed into mesh bags and cinched tight.

Mid-morning, as the fog cleared, tourists arrived from the city in their Saab's and BMW's. I set them up with bait and showed them how to use the boat's four-stroke motor. Sometimes, the father of the family would lean in and ask quietly where the "hot spot" was. The first few weeks I'd raise my hands and try to explain that because of the movement of the ocean, the tide, it didn't really matter. It was after I began giving up my "secret channels" that I began getting tipped.

I was working the marina one morning when a Subaru pulled up. I happened to look up as the family got out, and there was Noel. She was cute in her jean jacket, her Converse, eighteen, nineteen years old. I was suddenly in a lovely position. I was the dockworker, the one who would tell her father about how to drive the boat, how to drop the baits. And I was blue collar, which the Portland city folk appreciated. They came down from the office with their rental slip: three life jackets, six baits, the usual.

"Hello, my name is Adam," I said, and went into my normal spiel.

I gave them the best baits I had. I took extra care in showing them how to throw them, how to rotate from one crab trap to the next, how to move the traps so that they were all hitting all the time. You see you had about six of these crab traps and you'd drop one, boat fifty feet down the bay, drop another, boat fifty feet, etc. By the time you dropped the sixth one, you swing back around and worked the first. The trick was to pull like hell. Slack in the line meant crab escape.

They did well on the water. Her father didn't have any trouble pulling the traps up. Noel drove and her mother Julia navigated, pointing to the traps and using the long gaveled hook to pull them into the boat by the bobber. I baited my traps slowly the rest of the time they were on the water, watching them all the while.

They came back in with a full bucket of crab, some hard-shell, some soft. Hard-shells were older crabs, and while they were generally smaller, they were denser with meat and better to eat. I helped them haul their bucket up to the steamer, a trough of salt water Cindy cooked all the crabs in, then went back down to the dock. I finished my work for the day. Many people came and went. There had been pretty girls before.

I covered all my baits with a tarp so that the seagulls wouldn't eat them. Noel and her family were having dinner, crab shells split open on the table before them. The coast of Oregon is beautiful at sunset, the sky an array of pinks and reds, reflecting on the bay. The maintenance man had started a fire in one of the portable pits. There were a half-dozen of us who worked at the marina, and would gather around the fire at night to swap stories, the surf breaking in the dark distance.

Tourists often stayed after sunset and drank around the fire. There were a few long term guests, characters: Big Rick, who drove a rig half the year and rode the Burlington Northern train line from South Dakota to Seattle the other half. Or Old Man Doc, who slept in the back of his truck and carved bas-reliefs of local birds and told war stories from Vietnam.

Noel's father called me over. Her mother smiled at me. Noel half-smiled, the way teenagers do when their parents embarrass them.

“Have a drink with us, Adam?” he asked. I was tired and wanted to change out of my wet and smelly clothes.

“Sure. Thank you.”

“How long have you been working here?” Noel’s mother asked.

“Two months. I’m from Florida. I’ve been traveling around for a bit.”

#### 4.

I go into the kitchen and rinse my cup out. I set it on the drying rack next to the sink. The country club feels strange now that all the guests have gone, its wedding identity stripped from it. I go to my room, change into my bathing suit, and set out for the sauna.

I walk the empty halls, the golf course outside without players. I find the hot stone sauna. The room contains a wood slatted bench bolted to the tile floor. A wooden bucket holds round, gray stones. There are no instructions, but there is a faucet to the right, and a pitcher. Hovering my hand above the stones, I feel no warmth. I fill the pitcher with water and pour it slowly over the stones: no sizzle, no steam.

I look around the bucket for an on switch, around the room for a place to put the stones, an oven to warm them, but see none. I don’t know what to do, so I sit on the wooden bench and wait. Maybe someone else will come in. But after some time, no one does, and I leave.

After my failed attempt at the sauna, I decided to go into town and catch a movie. I change into jeans, a t-shirt. I find out from the front desk that there’s a shuttle that runs from the country club to a nearby mall.

The mall is huge, with large glass windows, escalators climbing up to heaven, a million stores. I buy one ticket to the newest Leonardo DiCaprio movie and ride the escalator up to the third floor. The mall is filled with people hustling about like ants. The theater is about half-full. I take a seat in the lower section. In a weird way, I've stayed today to test out being alone. I need to begin to understand what it's like to eat breakfast, and go to the movies, and sleep by myself. The movie begins.

5.

The morning after I arrived, I slept through breakfast. I gave Noel a call, but she didn't answer. She had become tunnel-visioned lately. Whatever was outside of what she was doing had no merit in her life, including her husband, apparently. I shot her a text, *Love you! Will call later.*

The wedding was outside. People were already seated in the wooden folding chairs facing the spot where, between two trees, Peter and Clara would be married. There was a stage, off to the side, that hadn't been there last night. And next to it, the bar that had. The bartender ready to serve.

The ceremony was short. A young guy played piano as Clara walked down the aisle. Peter and Clara moved into the yard to have their first dance. "Come Rain or Come Shine" by Ray Charles. We formed a circle around them as they danced. You don't expect your spouse to get sick. You hope, you pray it doesn't happen. But I never actually thought it would happen to

us. Then, it did, and it's scary, and you don't understand it, and you try and you try, but there is nothing you can do.

After their dance, Peter announced they would begin serving lunch, inside and outside, and that the bar was open.

I went back to my room and called Noel. This time, she picked up.

"How's everything going?" I asked. She was feeling better, had gone out to breakfast with Austin, then to the grocery. I told her about the wedding, the hotel, the food, how Peter and Clara wished that she could be here.

"I wish I could have gone," Noel said. "What's on your agenda for the rest of the day?"

"We have the afternoon off. Dinner at six."

"Are there any good-looking bridesmaids for you to dance with?" she joked.

"Oh, so many," I said. We'd never talked about what I'd do once she's gone.

There was a knock at my door.

"Hold on, there's one of them now," I said. I put the phone down and went to the door. Trent, Nick, and Alisha were there, with hotel towels over their shoulders and bag lunches in their hands.

"What's up?" I asked.

"We're going to the falls. You in?" Trent asked. I looked back over my shoulder at the phone.

"Give me a second."

I closed the door half way.

“Hey.”

“You weren’t kidding,” Noel said.

“It’s this guy, Trent. I guess people are going swimming. I’m invited.”

“All right. Well, have fun.”

“Thanks.”

6.

After our drink at the marina, Noel’s parents invited me over for dinner the next night. I drove my motorcycle over to their summer home. It was right on the coast. I had passed these homes many times driving up and down the coast. I had always wondered who was lucky enough to live so close to the water.

Nervously, I double-checked the address to the brass numbers above the door, then knocked. Noel came to the door. She wore an oversized brown sweater that I’d see her in so many times over the years. The house was wood floors and large windows and an island in the kitchen, music I had not heard before playing on the stereo. Her parents were in the kitchen, cooking together, and there were wine glasses on the island. Her parents smiled at me. I liked them already. They had a cohesiveness my parents lacked. Her mother poured me a glass of wine, continued cooking. The sound of the surf, and fish frying, smells of butter and lemon, the sea breeze.

“This is a beautiful house,” I said, and they smiled, thanked me.

“Grab that colander,” Noel’s mother said.

I handed it to her and she drained the pasta.

“How did you end up on the coast?” Noel’s father asked.

I told him about my drive across the country, the people I had met and the floors I’d slept on. Then we talked about their family.

7.

When the movie is over, I walk outside. The driver is sitting in the shuttle reading the newspaper.

“Good movie?” he asks.

“A little long,” I say.

We head back to the country club, past the many restaurants and outlet malls that seem to comprise this town. I have dinner alone in the dining room, no waiters circling with wine tonight. After dinner I watch some TV in my room.

8.

The falls were about a half hour away in Trent’s rental car. We’d go, swim, and be back before dinner. We parked in a gravel lot in front of a wooden sign with a trail map carved into it: half a mile to a red dot labeled “falls” before looping back around to where we were.

“Nature,” Trent said, looking around. “I hope we see a fucking bear.”

Fortunately, we did not see any fucking bears. There were a few birds, but that was about it. The falls were actually quite peaceful. About twenty feet tall, a steady stream of water spilling from between two rocks and splashing down into a deep pool beneath. The water itself was clear, and we could see down to the stony bottom. The canopy of trees stretched high above us.

“All right, bitches, let’s get wet,” Trent said, taking his shirt off. We undressed.

We climbed the rocks sloping up the side of the waterfall— Alisha first, followed by Nick, then Trent, then me. We took the rocks slowly, slapping at mosquitos as we climbed. The water roared next to us. When we got to the top, the river was wide and flat. Peaceful.

We walked to the center of the river and crept toward the edge of the falls.

“Who’s first?” Nick asked, looking at Alisha, then Trent, then me.

“I’ll jump,” I said. The others backed away so that I would have room. It seemed silly to be afraid of anything when even the life you planned was so uncertain.

The ground at the edge of the waterfall was surprisingly firm beneath my feet. I don’t know why, but I imagined the rocks at the edge would be loose, falling away, the cause for this waterfall in the first place. But I got a good push and was in the air, my arms tucked tight at my side. I could hear Trent yelling, “Wooo-eeeeee,” from behind me, but I was laser-focused on the water, on not hitting any rocks, on clenching my body tight and disappearing into the water without slapping against the surface. My guts rose up to my chest as I fell. Then, before I knew it, I was hitting the water, getting sucked under with the current. I surfaced.

Trent yelled, “Hell, yeah!”

It seemed oddly loud in the quiet of this place. He jumped next, swam over and joined me on a log, and we watched as Nick and Alisha joked around, Nick threatening to push her off.

Nick faced the edge. He took a few quick steps, then jumped. It seemed like nothing at first, a slight misstep. But then he was noticeably out of control as he moved through the air. He hit the water at a weird angle, didn’t surface for some time, then was tossed up by the current. Alisha screamed. Nick floated toward us, unconscious. Trent and I ran awkwardly through the

water toward him. We pulled his heavy body to shore, holding his face up so that he could breathe. The back of his head was bleeding. Blood ran down his neck and dripped into the water.

By the time we got him to shore Alisha was all the way down the rocks, heading toward us. Trent put his ear to Nick's chest, listened for his heart. Trent was suddenly a different person. He was able, purposed, clinical. Trent pumped at Nick's chest. Alisha paced with her arms crossed over her chest, staring down at Nick's body.

"Don't you need to do the breaths?" I asked.

"No," Trent said. Pumping. Pumping. Then, like I'd only ever seen in movies, Nick coughed, and lifted his shoulders. Water dribbled down his chin onto his chest. He looked around, wide-eyed, lost.

"Baby?" Alisha said, getting down on her knees next to Nick, hugging him around the shoulders.

"Damn," I said.

Alisha started dressing.

"Come on, we have to get him to the hospital."

Nick could walk, but only with support. Trent and I helped him back to the car, our boxers soaked. Alisha, dressed and dry, carried our clothes. We drove to the hospital.

Once there, we helped Nick inside. He and Alisha went back to see the doctor, head injuries taking precedence over sunburns and jellyfish stings. They were back there for a half hour when Alisha came out and told us that he'd need stitches, and that we should go on back to the hotel. They'd catch a cab later.

9.

Noel and I saw each other every night the rest of that weekend. She came to the coast many times while I was working at the marina. She came without her parents. She stayed in their coastal house, and would have me over for dinner. I'd buy fresh crab from Noah for cheap and we'd cook them in a tall pot in her kitchen.

We drank her parents wine and played like it was our house, and it kind of was. I'd come home from work and it was like we were a married couple. We talked into the night with the windows open and the smell of the ocean beyond. It was the end of the summer, the cool weather already beginning, but not yet the constant, drizzling rain. We played Scrabble and wrote letters to old friends.

10.

Trent and I got back to the country club having forgotten all about the wedding that was going on. It was eight. Guests danced on the lawn, drunk and jovial. I followed Trent into the kitchen where an employee loaded a rack of plates into the industrial washing machine. There were chafing dishes filled with pulled pork, ribs, baked beans, mac n' cheese.

"We missed dinner. Can we grab a plate?" Trent said.

"Sure," the dishwasher said.

We grabbed clean plates from a stack on the counter and loaded them up with food. Trent ate as he loaded his plate. When he got to the end of the line, he circled back for seconds, BBQ sauce wet on his lips.

“Where is everyone?” Trent asked, looking around the empty kitchen. The wait staff was nowhere to be seen.

“They all go out and smoke, after service,” the dishwasher said.

“True,” Trent said, taking two bottles of red wine from the counter. We went out back, onto the patio, to a couple of rocking chairs at the end of the porch. No one really even noticed us. We ate, pulling meat from bone, drinking the wine from the bottles.

The lights in the trees. The golf course. The band on stage. Everyone dressed up and dancing. It was pleasant.

One by one, or in pairs, people went back to their rooms, but Trent and I remained in our rocking chairs and sipped our wine. The band had quit, packed up, and loaded into their van. The bartender put his bottles into his plastic crate and took them inside.

Trent smiled at me, then got up. One by one, he turned all the rocking chairs onto their sides, their backs, leaned them against the tables. When he’d made it all the way down the porch, every chair turned, he walked back to me.

“I’m going to bed,” he said. “It’s been real.”

“Goodnight. I’m going to stay up for a bit.”

Left alone, the crickets seemed suddenly loud. The lawn was mussed up, divotted from dancing and croquet. Beer cans lay on the ground around the trash bin. The portable bar and the risers the band had played on were like props on an empty stage. I stood, and was going to set the overturned chairs upright, but... why bother? Instead, I picked up my chair and set it down gently on its side.

#

After dinner, I go back to my room to call Noel. I take off my shoes, recline on the bed.

The phone rings, and rings. Finally, she answers.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hey. How are you?” she asks.

“I’m fine.”

I tell her about my failure at the sauna and we laugh. About going to the movies alone.

Dinner alone.

“I miss you,” I say.

“I’ve missed you, too,” she says.

“Tell me about your day.”

There was a trip to the grocery store, and a problem with the insurance company that she had to sit on the phone for forty-five minutes to solve, getting transferred twice.

“But you fixed it?” I ask.

“Eventually,” she says. “Until next month when something else is messed up.”

“We’ll deal with next month next month,” I say.

We sit in silence for a minute.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then? You’re landing at 1:15?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

“Sleep tight.”

“You too.”

“I love you.”

“I love *you*.”

## APPENDIX: READING LIST

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