

2016

The Person You're Waiting For: Stories

Charles Ramsay McCrory

University of Mississippi. Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon_thesis



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McCrory, Charles Ramsay, "The Person You're Waiting For: Stories" (2016). *Honors Theses*. 179.
https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon_thesis/179

This Undergraduate Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College (Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College) at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

THE PERSON YOU'RE WAITING FOR: STORIES

by
Charles Ramsay McCrory

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, MS
May 2016

Approved by

Advisor: Professor Tom Franklin

Reader: Dr. Matt Bondurant

Reader: Dr. Debra Young

© 2016
Charles Ramsay McCrory
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grateful acknowledgment for this collection is due to my mother, Deirdre McCrory Henry, whose presence I feel in everything I write; Tom Franklin, for moral and textual support; *Mississippi Review*, in which “The Parents” originally appeared; and Jules Wood, my most trusted reader.

ABSTRACT

CHARLES RAMSAY MCCRORY: The Person You're Waiting For: Stories
(Under the direction of Tom Franklin)

This collection of short fiction explores family, grief, and trauma from a variety of perspectives. Other themes spanning these five stories include parent-child bonds, addiction and recovery, and sexuality. Two pairs of stories (“The Parents” and “The Painter,” and “Johnnie Walker” and “Staying Late,” respectively) are linked in terms of character and setting; the middle story, “Limits,” is linked only tenuously to the last two stories through a common character. As stated in my introduction, I wrote each story on its own terms; I did not consider each story’s placement in a collection until I had written and edited them all. Arranging these stories together, I have found a great deal of thematic overlap among them. I hope their placement in this collection gives the feeling of a cohesive body of work.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
The Parents.....	11
The Painter.....	27
Limits.....	44
Johnnie Walker.....	57
Staying Late.....	90

Introduction

In a recent conversation with Tom Franklin, my thesis director and de facto editor, I likened the stories in this collection to varyingly well-behaved children: one was its high school's valedictorian and president of the drama club; one was beginning to find its way but would need some extra love and attention; one would not stop running around in its underwear and huffing glue. This is to say that assembling the following stories into a collection felt surprisingly discordant. Though several of them are linked in terms of characters and setting, I had written each on its own terms, without a sense of how they might all look and sound together. Moreover, I had played favorites; I was not sure I wanted my glue-sniffer sitting next to my valedictorian. But as I toyed with the placement of these stories, I began to see how their voices overlapped, revealing a common ancestry. Imperfect or altogether destroyed parent-child relationships pervade them, as does a focus on addiction and recovery. Trauma and grief, and the messy range of human responses to them, also figure prominently. Until I attempted to place these stories in some purposeful order, I did not realize how deeply these themes preoccupied me. Only then did their placement make sense.

It was important to me that each story be able to stand alone despite its intertextuality with other pieces. For instance, I wanted the emotional weight of the school shooting depicted in "The Parents" to resonate throughout "The Painter," though the event appears more obliquely in the latter story. I wanted Jim and Bridget's confused courtship in "Staying Late" to exist independently of the depiction of their alcohol-

ravaged marriage in “Johnnie Walker.” I placed “Staying Late” last in the collection for this reason; though it ends sadly, I think it offers a reprieve from “Johnnie Walker”’s unrelenting nastiness. Likewise, I decided “Limits,” a comparatively light, humorous story, belonged in the middle, breaking up two sequences of tougher, linked stories.

This introduction will focus on each story individually: its genesis, its writing and editing processes, and its relationship to other stories in the collection. Because it details my process of writing each story, this introduction includes explicit plot details. For this reason, it may best be read after the collection itself.

“The Parents”

The first story in this collection, “The Parents,” entered my head as a single image: a mural along the wall of a school, commemorating the lives of children who had been killed there in a mass shooting. In the mural, the children walked single-file from the school’s entrance toward a break in the clouds symbolizing heaven. I saw the children’s parents standing around the mural, unanimously displeased with it. This was during the summer of 2014, nearly two years after the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, an event that had deeply unsettled me, but had found no expression in my work. As I wrote into this image, the grieving parents began to speak to me in a collective voice. I wrote them as “the parents,” a plural protagonist acting and thinking as one. Gradually one mother, whom I named Margot, began to speak louder than the others, until she stepped out from the chorus as my real protagonist. In its finished version, “The Parents” begins in this choral voice and then narrows its focus to Margot. This perspective shift mirrors Margot’s struggle to break out

of the homogenized grieving process she sees being imposed on her both from without (by the news media) and within (by her fellow bereaved parents).

I did not realize until long after I had finished this story how much its process had been informed by my love of Greek tragedy. Though its subject matter is plainly topical, some of its structural and thematic elements—the sacrifice of innocents, the chorus of elders, a female subject who embodies raw emotion within a culture that values cool-headedness and decorum—have their roots in Euripides’ *Medea*. As with *Medea*, I wanted to bring a foreignness to Margot’s character that would set her apart from the mostly white, Anglo-Saxon parents around her. This foreignness appears in the mention of her Roma grandfather who was separated from his daughters during the Holocaust.

Whenever an act of violence erupts in smalltown America, the media seems inclined to portray the victims as being somehow representative of America: the town becomes Anywhere, USA; the slain children become “everyone’s children.” Implicit in this technique is a sense of shock and outrage that something so terrible could happen in this country. With Margot and another mother, Aisha, I wanted to complicate this narrative. Both mothers are legacies of a different America, one marked by the experience of immigration, slavery, and genocide. Their genealogies tell a story in which the violent severance of children from their parents was not unusual.

When I submitted this story to Tom Franklin’s beginning fiction workshop, several of my peers expressed concern at the way the woman in the parka informs the parents that their children have been killed: “‘If you are in this room,’ she said, ‘the person you are waiting for is not coming back.’” They felt jarred by this line’s phrasing: it seemed to them too brusque, too insensitive, to have really happened. I did not invent

this line; it is roughly how one of the Sandy Hook mothers, in a televised interview, describes being told the same news by Dannel Malloy, the Governor of Connecticut. (I gave this line to the woman in the parka, an existing character, for the sake of economy.) I seriously considered my classmates' concern, bearing in mind that the line's basis in fact did not necessarily justify its inclusion in a work of fiction. I tested out other, gentler versions, but these all felt awkward and inauthentic. In the end I decided to keep the original line. Its simplicity seemed the only way to convey such devastating news to a roomful of people. The line eventually suggested itself to me as the basis for this collection's title.

"The Painter"

I finished revising "The Parents" in Tom Franklin's workshop and, with his encouragement, sent it out to a handful of journals. Submitting the story gave me a rare feeling of closure, of having done my best possible work. Though the story felt finished, I found myself returning to it with a new curiosity about one of its minor characters, the painter who designs the failed mural for the elementary school. He appears in the story only briefly, yet I had given him a full name, Harold Niles, along with a sparse physical description and a job at the local hardware store. I had also specified that Harold has no children. Unconsciously, I had left myself a set of clues leading to a character who had previously escaped my notice. Now I found I had further questions about Harold: What were his motivations for volunteering to paint the mural? Why had he chosen such a treacherous design? What was the significance of his childlessness, which I had made a point of mentioning?

Where the parents had spoken to me in a choral third person, Harold spoke in a workmanlike first. His story arranged itself into the basic structure of an AA recovery talk: “Our stories disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*). Harold introduces himself, discloses his alcoholic past, and describes his life in sobriety, before moving into his encounters with Crystal, one of the town’s bereaved mothers. With Harold’s alcoholism, I wanted to give him the outlines of a guilt-ridden past for which he was desperate to atone through service to others. This informs his perhaps excessive reaction to his botched interaction with Crystal over her daughter. Harold is obsessed with helping others so that he can stay sober and avoid causing further wreckage. His misstep with Crystal thus becomes, in his mind, his responsibility to amend, no matter how uncomfortable it might make her. Harold’s sexual attraction to Crystal did not enter my mind at first, but it did manifest in the writing. I shared Harold’s opinion of himself as acting under wholesome, if partly self-interested, motives, but it quickly became apparent to me that another motive was operating unconsciously. Realizing this allowed me to heighten the uncomfortable intimacy during the final scene in Crystal’s house, when Harold is acutely aware of her bathing down the hall.

The first draft of this story ended with Harold painting the second-grade hallway. After reading this draft, Tom Franklin suggested it was not yet finished. He argued that Harold and Crystal’s relationship had not been resolved: he would need to go to her house and try to replicate the color of her daughter’s walls. As I played with this suggestion, I knew immediately that he was right. Rather than ending abruptly, the story assumed a natural progression: Harold and Crystal’s interactions move from his territory

(the hardware store) to hers (the PTA, then her house). Tom's suggestion taught me a much-needed lesson about conflict. I am a shy person, and skirt conflict in life as often as I can. This caution can sneak into my fiction: conversations end just before they become too uncomfortable; the worst possible thing is imagined, but never realized. Writing the new ending allowed me to lean into my discomfort and create what I believe is a transformative moment for both my characters.

"Limits"

I based "Limits" on a beach trip I took with friends on a recent Fourth of July. Our party was made up entirely of recovering alcoholics; we were joined later by a group of recovering addicts. A few elements of the trip made me want to write about it: the sometimes starkly visible differences between alcoholics and addicts, the formation of chosen families that so often happens in recovery, and the seemingly trivial transgressions that can spell disaster for people with a history of much greater offenses.

The beach, located just outside the college town where my characters live, represents a liminal space where they can toe the boundaries of their new lives, discovering new freedoms as well as new restrictions. Having known several friends in the drug court program, I have a great appreciation for the balancing act it requires. The freedom it offers is heavily monitored and can collapse with the slightest infraction. I illustrate this through the character of Gray, with his dietary restrictions, constant surveillance, and finally the incident with the park ranger, which threatens to pose outsized consequences for him. This incident did really take place, though in the story I expand it for maximum discomfort.

Parent-child bonds run throughout this collection, often corroded or altogether destroyed. The chosen families in “Limits” seem to me the most functional examples I have written, bound by a mutual commitment to survival and recovery. Kim and Gray represent surrogate parents for Vincent, whose own family history I decided to omit here. (It receives a much more exhaustive treatment in “Johnnie Walker.”) Likewise, Trixie serves as a protective mother for Cody when his dancing attracts the unwanted attention of the park ranger.

As is often the case when translating real-life experiences into fiction, I had to compress a few characters. The large cast in my first draft generated some confusion with my readers, prompting me to merge Kim’s actions and dialogue with those of another character whom I deleted. Where “The Parents” brought up the question of whether journalistic facts were always necessary in fiction, this story asked the same question about personal facts. With “Limits,” I tried to prioritize clarity over “what really happened.” This helped me to see my characters as my own inventions rather than the real people (including myself) on whom they are closely based.

“Johnnie Walker”

In November 2015 I began to hear an angry, caustic, female stream of consciousness running through my head. Out of this voice, I wrote “Johnnie Walker” in a feverish rush over the course of a few weeks. Molly Bloom’s “Penelope” episode at the end of *Ulysses* and Addie Bundren’s lone monologue in *As I Lay Dying* were both obvious stylistic influences. Content-wise, this piece is heavily biographical; its family dynamic and history mirror my own almost exactly. Prior to “Johnnie Walker,” my

mother had appeared in my fiction only sporadically. I remember her drawing me a French mustache in Sharpie for my second-grade play, the way Margot does for Daniel in “The Parents.” Like Daniel, I remember worrying for my mother when she was late to pick me up from school, and engaging in the magical thinking that the day I stopped worrying, something really would go wrong. This story’s stream-of-consciousness style freed me to tackle the subject of my mother more directly and fearlessly. That said, I made sure to recognize my protagonist, Bridget, as a character. She contains overt aspects of my mother, but I do not believe it is possible to distill a whole person into a work of fiction. My goal, above all, was to tell a story.

Bridget’s alcoholic thought process, mercurial and non-linear, lent itself to a stream-of-consciousness narration. Faulkner’s famous assertion: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past,” is especially true of active alcoholics, for whom the unsettled past feels realer than a present obliterated daily by alcohol and consumed with hour-to-hour survival. The stream-of-consciousness mode allowed me to dip into the past episodes that most preoccupy Bridget, from her partner, Claire’s, death in a car accident to her sexual assault and near-death experience in college. Bridget sees every relationship in her life, past and present, through a distorted lens. This is most poignant in the case of her son, Vincent. Bridget genuinely loves her son, but her alcoholism prevents her from seeing him as a full person. In thinking about him, she veers from adoration to distrust to contempt to rage, sometimes within the space of a paragraph. I believed I could better convey this erratic alcoholic thinking by focusing on Bridget’s immediate experience than with a more straightforward linear narrative.

“Staying Late”

“Johnnie Walker” was an exhausting story to write. I imposed breaks on myself throughout, and when I had finished I felt more fatigued than by anything I had previously written. Still, as with “The Painter,” I did not consider myself finished with the characters I had created. I decided in my next story to switch perspective. It seemed necessary to humanize the character of Jim, who in Bridget’s perception in “Johnnie Walker” is alternately cartoonish and menacing. To accomplish this, I used the old trick of returning to Jim’s childhood. “Staying Late” begins with Jim at six years old, watching his mother stuff all his toys into bags and load them onto a garbage truck. I wanted to manipulate the reader’s sympathy, making it near-impossible not to feel for Jim despite the boorish adult he will become. I decided Jim would be telling this story to Bridget early in their relationship. This created a device by which I could interweave his backstory with the story of his and Bridget’s courtship. As I conjured up more and more of Jim’s painful childhood, I found that these memories could do more than simply generate sympathy for him. The coldness Jim experiences as a child from both his parents helps explain his emotional insecurity, his distrust of people, and his reluctance to have children that causes his split with Bridget at the end of the story.

“Staying Late” is a story about how two people with almost identical backgrounds can fundamentally misunderstand one another. Though Jim and Bridget both grew up white in smalltown Mississippi, attended similar Southern colleges, graduated from the same law school, and hold the same job, the seemingly minute differences in their histories create major rifts in worldview. Jim’s Catholic education reinforced his social

conservatism, while Bridget's years at a "nominally Methodist and notoriously secular" college exposed her to a community of lesbian friends. Jim's mother survived his father and did not remarry, while Bridget's parents divorced and her mother started a new career. Given these disparities, their failures to communicate make more sense. Neither Jim nor Bridget can be entirely vulnerable with the other. Jim opens up about his childhood, perhaps to excess, but he can only do this when drunk; likewise, alcohol appears to offer Bridget temporary relief from her anxiety and guardedness. She discusses her sexuality only in asides, and declines to introduce Jim to any of her old friends. I wanted to leave her motivations unexplained. She may fear that Jim, a cradle Catholic with a limited understanding of sexuality, will judge her; she may also be trying to distance herself from a past lesbian identity. For whatever reason, she never allows Jim to know her completely. The shadow of Bridget's sexual assault, to which she flashes back in "Johnnie Walker," is present here, though like the school shooting in "The Painter" it is treated more obliquely here. It manifests in her anxiety, her missed period at the end of the story, and her unknowability to Jim. What he perceives as her quality of emotional withholding is partly the result of her past trauma.

On its own terms, "Staying Late" exists as a failed, final love story. Of course, a reader who follows the order of the collection will know that Jim and Bridget eventually reconnect and marry, with dismal results. Much territory remains to be explored between Jim, Bridget, and Vincent; I intend to develop them further into a novel. For the purposes of this collection, I hope "Limits," "Johnnie Walker," and "Staying Late" stand on their respective feet, while suggesting room for further exploration.

The Parents

The parents of the murdered second grade recalled that February morning in all its minutiae. They'd been children the summer of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, married with kids of their own by 9/11. They knew the drill of witness. Whether you heard the news in your mother's living room in Chicago or driving to work with talk radio in Memphis, the details stitched you all together in the patchwork of event. But when it was you—when you were a Kennedy, a Pentagon widow—the “where were you”'s of others had a way of crowding the room where you grieved. The governor and later the president released statements of sympathy for the events at St. Lucy's. The nation cracked open their small town and dug its fingers in. These were *America's children*, gunned down in their innocence. Their parents were living *every parent's worst nightmare*, and the hearts of America's families went out to them. In pounds of stationery and FedExed casseroles and handwritten condolences from living children and unquantifiable prayers, they went out and converged on the parents. “Today,” wrote one columnist, “wherever we are, we are all the parents of St. Lucy's.” *Come into our grief*, said the parents. *The water's warm*.

“I didn't think of Felix all morning,” said Grace. “Not once, until I got the phone call. I dropped him off and he was gone from my mind. Mother's intuition: what a crock of shit.”

Margot, next in the circle of chairs, hesitated. “It was the first morning in three weeks I managed to get Daniel to carpool on time,” she said finally.

Each telling upset a small land mine, another detail that erupted in hindsight. Naomi had faked sick and been muscled out of bed. (“If I could just have not been such a

hard-ass, just once,” said Laura.) In her rush, Aisha had forgotten her and Mariel’s ritual air-kiss, sending her daughter off instead with a distracted wave. Not one story comforted. Each only compounded the parents’ sense of uselessness. At ten o’clock that morning, while they paddled around like minor satellites in a five-mile orbit of the school, a lone gunman, entering through the gym, had shot and killed half the second-grade class, their teacher, and then himself. Here all their accounts fused in the unifying light of the news itself. Into that light they all walked together and were swallowed.

Margot was standing in the kitchen when the phone rang. The caller ID read *Reverse 911*. She frowned at the phone for a moment; were the *police* calling *her*? When she picked up, an officer told her there was an active shooter at St. Lucy’s. The school was on lockdown. The next call was from Patrick. He’d been called already and was on his way to pick her up. “Don’t get in the car,” he said. “I’m coming.” He knew how she combusted in crisis, how she’d shaken and dropped things, rendered bodily useless, when Daniel developed 103-degree fever as a baby. She was doing it now. She dropped the phone and sank into a chair, then kept rising halfway out of it and falling back. The cleaning lady paused on the landing, a hamper against her hip.

“Is something wrong, Miss?”

“I don’t know yet,” she said.

A barricade surrounded the school, as if for construction, or a parade. There were no children in sight, no signs of damage to the buildings. The fleet of firetrucks and ambulances and police cars, all lights flashing, connoted some exhaustive safety demonstration, not an emergency. The police would not tell the parents anything. “What’s going on?” they shouted. “Please tell us what’s going on!” But whatever was

going on, there could be no time wasted informing them. They were caught like immigrants in a large incoherent system. Margot felt she'd suddenly forgotten English.

They waited in and beside their cars. Aisha paced in a sports bra and yoga pants. Grace had salon foils in her hair. Laura, robed and damp-headed, must have been in the shower when the police called. Ted cradled her against him like a newborn. They checked their phones and watches, took turns fielding phone calls from family and standing watch over the front entrance. Every few minutes one parent would step over to another's car, hoping someone knew more than she did. No one knew anything. They were a hive of unknowing, with no resources to pool.

Margot's eyes never left the building. This wasn't what you permitted to happen when you had children. She had been ready to endure all thinkable torments on Daniel's behalf: walls of fire, torture and interrogation, her flesh as food in some projected time of starvation. Never this helpless waiting. Faith was foreign currency to her. Her thoughts reeled back to college: Plato's cave, Schrödinger's cat. Things hidden, shadows of things real, things left cruelly to the imagination. *Just show us the fucking cat!* Her son was dead. He was alive. The school's blank frame stared back at her from each reality. She'd wanted to homeschool. Why hadn't she homeschooled?

Paramedics hustled out of the school, wheeling covered stretchers toward the ambulances. More veils, more secrecy. Whose children were these? Would they live or die? Then from the back door of the gym came a line of children headed by a woman Margot didn't recognize. She could have been a teacher or an officer. Her bulky black parka looked calmingly institutional, but Margot didn't see a badge. The woman gripped the lead child by the hand and the others followed single-file, hands over shoulders in an

urgent conga line. Some were crying, others holding on in grim silence. Each face, however warped with distress, looked intact. A gust of relief swept the parking lot as parents recognized children. First names were shouted, answered with variations on “Mom” and “Dad.” Margot felt this swell being siphoned out of her own lungs. This was not his class. It was a miracle, a gift, they were alive, but she couldn’t spare the energy of feeling. The woman in the parka rushed the children across the parking lot and into the firehouse. Margot snapped her attention back to the front.

Some afternoons at carpool, when the traffic was thinning and most of the other kids had already been picked up, Daniel started to worry that Margot wouldn’t make it: she’d forgotten him, or been in an accident. He said he knew the day he stopped worrying, it would happen; so he kept the worry alive, holding the balance of fate in his stomach.

“OCD,” she told Patrick. “He’s definitely mine.”

“Why don’t you leave earlier to pick him up?” he said, as if he didn’t know.

A cruel recognition twisted in her now as the school continued to empty, officers shepherding stragglers two and three at a time across the parking lot. The officer facing her across the barricade pulled a walkie-talkie from his belt and spoke into it. Replacing it, he pronounced the evacuation complete. The shooter was dead. The parents were to follow the officer into the firehouse.

Inside, officers began pairing children with their parents. After the initial release, the kneeling and clinging and sobbing, this transaction became an enervated version of carpool. Bleary-eyed parents stood in line to sign a list while their children twisted impatiently on their arms. This space too began to clear out, and the remaining parents,

Margot and Patrick among them, were shuffled into separate rooms. She could see this going on indefinitely, through an endless series of rooms, a horrible nesting doll of waiting.

They ended up in a tiny back room with venetian blinds and enough folding chairs for each set of parents to take turns sitting and pacing. Margot watched the bars of sunlight slip across the linoleum, toward the door. There might as well have been an hourglass. While she was looking at the floor, someone came into the room. Margot looked up. It was the woman in the black parka. The woman cleared her throat, producing instant silence. Several parents got to their feet.

“If you are in this room,” she said, “the person you are waiting for is not coming back.”

Margot’s first thought was to switch rooms. She glanced around at the blinds, the folding chairs. *Not this room. Fuck this room.* If being here meant what the woman in the parka said it did, then she refused. She would run to the room where the other parents were being kept and Daniel would be there waiting for her. Beside her, Patrick crumpled in his seat. A ragged wail came up from the bone pile of him. Margot wanted to slap him. *Get a grip! We’ve got the wrong room.* She was on her feet, tugging at his arm. He looked up at her, his face a vacuum. Margot looked back, then around her, at the other parents breaking down in their chairs, and it hit her. The place she would never go, where she was driven blindfolded in her dreams: she was here.

In August, the parents had killed a proposal to install metal detectors at each entrance to the school. “I don’t want our children to feel like they’re going to school in a police state,” said Laura. Ted, a professor of sociology at the college, cited a recent study

on the effects of aesthetic stimuli on a child's sense of safety. "Bottom line," said Aisha, sharing a cigarette with Margot in the parking lot during deliberations, "no one wants to feel like they're shelling out ten thousand a year to send their kid to an inner-city school. Mariel walked through a scanner every day we lived in Chicago, and she's no worse for it."

After what happened, it never occurred to Margot to be angry about this. She could find no order to rebel against: the yeas and nays alike had had their children taken from them.

"It's not *in*justice," she said tonight, when the invisible conch shell came round to her again. "It's *a*justice. It's *pre*justice. There just is no justice."

But justice, like any inherited religion, could be difficult to deprogram. One night, drinking scotch in the kitchen at 2 a.m., Margot reminded Patrick of the abortion she'd had three years before Daniel. He looked up from his glass. "Must feel like you've shot your wad, then." She stood without thinking and punched him in the mouth.

Phil had sat silent and crimson through the whole meeting. "If I could've just had five minutes alone with that son of a bitch," he said now. The others had always laughed at Phil's comprehensive five-minutes-alone policy. He'd requested five minutes alone with every Middle Eastern despot from Qadafi to Hussein; a five-minute solo audience with Woody Allen, the last two popes, the kid at the Chevron who insisted on carding him every time he bought cigarettes. Now they were silent. What would any of them give for five minutes alone with the son of a bitch, who had blown his brains out, denying them their vengeance, before the police could intervene?

Beth and Astrid had been among the first lesbian couples in the state to conceive a child through artificial insemination. “There were things we feared for Ryan,” said Beth. “Some confusion, some insensitivity. Just kids not knowing any better, asking, ‘So, where’s your dad?’ But this? Never this.”

Never this. Never our kids. Look back two generations and you invariably found some lost children; further, and they were an occupational hazard. Margot’s Roma grandfather had lost both daughters in the initial separations at Buchenwald. Hopeless to estimate the extent of cleaving and scattering of parents and kids in Aisha’s genealogy. Their foremothers had postponed naming children until they’d survived infancy. These parents, some remembered, others ancestral abstractions, had suffered toward a present of no more suffering, a steady march of requiems and shivas into the promise of prenatal vitamins, modern obstetrics, neighborhood watches, child protection laws. How grateful the parents had been for their sacrifice.

Nights, mornings, blankets, underwear, shoes, toothpaste. Churches, vigils, candles, vodka, cigarettes, phone calls, morgues. The parents looked on the uncovered bodies of their children and nodded confirmation. They buried them in family plots, in separate ceremonies. They sealed the crime scene photos and destroyed them at home or locked them away in safes. They studied the face of the dead gunman—a kid, twenty and skinny and pale, with a pathological mop of brown hair, a face out of Edvard Munch, caving at the cheekbones. Before leaving home that morning he had shot and killed his mother while she slept. “If only he’d extended me the same kindness,” Patrick said tonight.

They each received a cardboard box containing the clothes their child had worn that morning. Margot carried Daniel's box unopened to the fire pit in the backyard, doused it in lighter fluid, and set it burning. When she'd dampened the ashes with the hose, she went back inside, walking past Daniel's room without going in.

In March, the city planted a row of wooden crosses in the field behind the playground. Margot and Patrick drove up with the others to paint Daniel's cross with his name. Beneath it she pinned a photo of Daniel in the class play, grinning in a black beret and curlicued mustache. He'd played a French painter, sung "Alouette." Margot drove to each rehearsal to draw on his mustache. The drama teacher could have done it herself, but Margot liked this personal touch. "I want you to remember where you got that hair, *mon cher*," she told him, touching the indomitable fuzz on her upper lip. These days she didn't bother waxing: not her lip, brows, armpits, legs. She went around fierce and scowling like Frida Kahlo. Patrick's grief-beard arrived in a staticky quilt of blacks and reds and browns. Hair was a shorthand they understood. *We do not have to have sex anymore.*

Steven, the boy Margot was fucking, was nineteen, a student at the college. He'd accidentally flicked hummus on her blouse at one of Ted's brown bag lectures, at an hour they both otherwise had free. Their schedules allowed either one leisurely or two hurried fucks at his apartment before she had to pick up Daniel. Often he made her late. Steven was polite, but with an ulterior selfishness, his goodbye counterweighted by a too-long kiss, a recidivist hand down her jeans. Carpool sermonized her—her Camry as confessional, faint coital aroma rising from her neck and armpits and mixing with the A/C, then the blaming presence of her son clambering into the backseat. Still, a part of her liked the arrangement, welcomed afterward the company of someone not yet tuned to

the radio frequencies of jealousy and suspicion, who had ears only for Blondie and Carole King.

After the shooting, Steven grew aloof with her. How could you continue to fuck a woman whose child had been murdered, who somehow still wanted you to? It was the confirmation of their separate sex languages, the younger of fumbling novelty and the older of deep need. She suspected she scared him when she swept into his apartment, tugged him free of his belt and jeans, sometimes only lifting her skirt and pulling her panties to one side, the whole thing over and done before its momentum left the silent room. Often it felt like rape. His shyness took on new contours with her as she watched him hampered by the act of stripping—his wince of frustration when a sleeve clung to his body or he had to wriggle out of the puddle of his jeans on the floor. He went down on her with his eyes trained cautiously on her face. Shivering, he came inside her in the false security that she'd entered menopause. She'd been flattered before, but now his youth was sinister to her. All youth was—its terrifying capabilities comorbid with its shyness, its looseness with reality. When he had committed some shocking deviance, the press would dredge this up as a warning no one had heeded. *He'd been sleeping with her. One of the mothers. Old enough to be his.*

She stepped back from Daniel's cross. Her son's name beside the names of children she'd driven to ballet and cooked for and taught to make s'mores. Whose parents she'd known and loved or never spoken to or even disliked. It had not only happened to Daniel, she knew; nor only to her. Still this jumble of names had the feel of a mass grave. Her grief would not fit tidily into a grid of other griefs. It was arrogant and antisocial and self-sustaining. She didn't answer calls from unfamiliar numbers. She refused interviews.

“It would be a chance to help,” said Laura, who had agreed to appear on the local morning show to discuss the shooting. But Margot didn’t want to help anyone. The world had shown her its sallow, pitiless center in the face of a twenty-year-old killer, a child it had fed with every advantage: white, suburban, deranged only by his displacement from all hardship, and she would give it no more of her time.

“I have nothing but pity for him,” Grace said now. “Psychological reports say he was mentally ill.”

“This country is mentally ill,” said Margot, though cross-talk was not permitted. “Burdening the victims with social awareness: that’s sickness for you. And anyway, what if he’d been black? Would the press have such a hard-on to explain how he could possibly have done what he did?”

Margot glanced over at Aisha. She looked back, her eyes glassy. “I don’t care if he was purple,” she said quietly. “He murdered my daughter. I’m not having this discussion.”

In April, the school commissioned a local artist to design a mural in memory of the children, to be painted along the second-grade hall with the parents’ approval. Harry Niles was shy, poodle-haired, childless. He wore a denim jacket flecked with paint from his job at the hardware store. In lieu of introducing his piece, he gave the parents a tight smile, fumbled with his jacket buttons, and peeled the cloth off his easel. His canvas depicted the slain teacher leading the children single-file from the front entrance of St. Lucy’s to a vanishing point where the sidewalk blended into a clearing in puffy clouds. The parents studied the faces in the line. These children were not their children. They were a Benetton ad. Margot counted one black face with beaded braids. Mariel had worn

her hair in a ponytail. And whose child had inspired the Latino face at the end of the line? None of them knew.

No one thought Niles to be anything but sincere, but for reasons they couldn't quite articulate, they unanimously found the mural repellant. Niles bowed his head and left them to deliberate. Laura drafted a polite rejection from their less polite comments and they called it a day, leaving one by one through the second-grade hall.

On her way home, Margot stopped at Michael's to buy painting supplies. Her mind was rank with the iconography of school: the cartoon apple with its pale oblong of sheen; the one-room schoolhouse out of Twain. How parents pined for this pathetic idyll. No automated locks, no reinforced glass, just the single bell hovering overhead in its steeple, unequipped for lockdowns and alarms, serving only to *bong, bong* playing children inside from the yard. Single file. Tucked shirts. The silent game. The Pledge of Allegiance. What good had any of this protocol done her son? Had he put his untested seven-year-old's faith in the school's lockdown drill? Trusted that climbing under his desk would allow him to crawl back out minutes later, take his spelling test, wait at carpool for his mother? She threw down her keys in the kitchen, pulled a frosty bottle of vodka from the freezer, and carried it into the spare room, where, with her canvas and paints, in an old maternity dress-turned-smock, she worked herself through the slippery mental processes and fraudulent creative bursts that come to the truly shit-house drunk. On her canvas, parents maneuvered a labyrinthine carpool inhabited by a Minotaur in a shapeless hoodie. One mother held a ball of twine that wound up into the sky, branching into a phone tree with names listed in tiny cursive. Margot fell asleep scrawling one of

these names. She woke dehydrated in the warm pulsing air of four o'clock, longing to lick the green sliver of lawn that showed between two window blinds.

In May, a colleague of Ted's referred him to a support group for bereaved parents. (So that's what they were: bereaved parents. They had wanted a new noun instead of the old one modified, but you took what labels you could.) The group met an hour out of town, not far enough that they wouldn't be recognized, but the distance provided some comfort all the same. Soon they all found themselves here on Tuesday nights, a PTA without a faculty chair, anarchy in a church basement.

"God will have a hard time explaining this to me," Laura was saying now, reaching between the folding chairs to grasp Ted's hand. "Don't hold your breath," Margot muttered, but no one heard her. Why did they still cling to the God thing? God was for finding your keys and speeding up traffic and helping you quit drinking. You couldn't really hold him accountable when your children were murdered. It was out of his jurisdiction.

When their hour was up they filed out to their cars, speaking little, and pulled onto the highway one by one, single file the long way home.

They drove in silence for some miles. Margot watched crepe myrtles pass in their low beams.

"You can keep this up if you want," she said after a while, "but I won't be going."

At a red light he seemed to be drafting his reply. "Even under ideal conditions for empathy," he said, "you are terminally misunderstood."

"I'm not asking anyone to understand me," she said. "I don't care."

"Forgive me. I forgot you have better ways of spending your evenings."

She could always smell Steven at these moments, as if Patrick's allusions triggered a release of him from her pores. She powered her window down.

He was quiet for a long time. "I've recorded the interview," he said finally. "You may want to see it."

Back home, Patrick stopped in the kitchen for a drink. Margot went straight to the TV and found the recording. She saw Laura and Grace and Aisha in their Ann Taylor and Mary Kay and turquoise jewelry, lined up on a sofa in the morning show's sun-flooded studio. A slideshow of the children's photos played on a screen behind them. The host rested a hand on Grace's knee. "If you are willing," she said, "could you take us through that morning?"

As Grace narrated, Margot watched the faces bloom and recede behind her head. Here was Felix, arms around his first and only puppy, his smile missing its first and last lost baby tooth. Mariel, ponytail poking through her cap as she wound back to strike a T-ball. And Daniel. Daniel in his black beret and pen mustache, the sight of which jarred her like that of her own handwriting.

"That's his picture!" she said. "How did they get his picture?" She watched herself play the outraged viewer: striding up to the TV and pressing her face close, as if she could snatch the image back to herself.

Patrick's voice came from inside the open freezer. "Margot, relax. I sent them the picture."

She turned to face the door that blocked his face. "Oh, did you? And did it occur to you to ask me first?"

“You may recall,” he said, pausing to scoop ice into a tumbler, “that he was my son too. You may also recall that he was gunned down in his classroom by a maniac, and some of us think that deserves to be talked about.”

“He was *our* son,” she said, her whole body quaking. “He was taken from us once already. And now you’ve taken him from us again. Sold him out to the daytime mourners of the heartland.” The face on the screen was now the concave mask of the shooter. The host said his first and last name. The image held, immune to the slideshow’s dissolving property.

Patrick declined to slam the freezer door. He let its internal magnets click it shut and sat down at the counter. Margot followed him.

“I swear, the best thing that ever happened to you people was our kids getting blown up. Now you all have something to talk about at the farmer’s market.”

He looked up at her in the lamplight. His face was suddenly that of a little boy in a silly tricolor beard, a face hurt so badly it formed a plea to the big unfair world. She had always hated in him his ease of feeling, how he could rinse himself in it like a summer shower. Now she craved it to her marrow. She wanted it close.

“You’re vulgar, Margot,” he said.

“I know.” She planted her palms on the counter and pulled herself across it, pushed her face into the hot blur her tears made of his. “Baby, I’m so sorry.”

His room. In neglecting to enter or even acknowledge it these three months, she had done great psychic work. She had pushed it outside the house, outside time. It hovered somewhere in the glittering fog over the trees on mornings she dragged the garbage to the curb, homey and unreachable as the surface of the moon. She rose before

dawn without waking Patrick, tiptoed down the hall, and opened the door. This room could not be his room. It rendered itself too faithfully before her, like a hollow impersonation of speech. On his desk the jellyfish lamp, sketchbook, and colored pencils arranged themselves according to the position of his body at the moment he left them. Somehow she had expected it to change. This was no longer a house that preserved a child's room. The parents screamed at one another with no one to hear. They unplugged the phone and the TV, burned the newspapers, got drunk and painted their nightmares in the spare room. A house like this rejected a child's room like a foreign organ. Still, here it was, this placeholder, this exhibit.

But the wrinkles in the sheets, they were his, the reindeer sweater in the closet still smelled of him. No morbid craftsmanship could duplicate his smell. She pulled the sweater from its hanger and pushed it into a Hefty bag, to see if she could do it. When she saw that she could, she had, she began to stuff the rest of the clothes into the bag. Halfway through, she left the closet and started piling his toys in the center of the bedroom, gingerly unsticking his sketches from their three-shades-lighter squares of wall. In this way she got nothing done and made herself deeply tired. She climbed into his bed, pulled the coverlet to her chin, and spread her arms and legs so she filled all four corners.

Sunday mornings she crawled into his bed, just wide enough for them to spoon. "This bed ain't big enough for the two of us," he drawled. "Sure it is," she said. "I used to be." There were games you could play using only your eyes. You could look for people in the ceiling plaster, or watch the fan blade spin overhead. You could let it go by in a blur or fixate on a single blade as it lapped the room. Sometimes you lost it as it dipped around the bowl of the lamp, so you couldn't be sure if you were following the same

blade, the one you'd chosen. Or you got dizzy and had to stop and press your foreheads together until balance returned.

She reached up and pulled the fan chain. The air began to slow and settle around her. She watched the blades skim the air like oars. You had to stare closely to catch the exact moment they stopped, straining your eyes until the plaster squirmed in your vision. Then they began to fall back the other way. Finally they rested over you in a wide stance, an idol with a mean metal grill for a face. She was good at seeing the faces in rooms, sensing what scared him. *It's okay*, she'd say, seeing. *I'm here*.

"I'm here," she said. Some things remained true.

The Painter

My name is Harold Niles. I am a painter. I am fifty-two years old, three years clean and sober, and two years divorced. I work days at a hardware store, mixing paints and copying keys and showing married couples how to sand down the legs of their chesterfields. I rent a one-bedroom house in a small town you'd never have heard of except that something awful happened here, something so bafflingly awful I will never understand it. If there's one reason I stay here it's because as long as I do, I have a chance of getting to the bones of it all.

When I drank I painted houses. A lot of new homes were shooting up out in the county, in freshly cleared tracts of land with names like Stratford, Mink Den, Sweetwater. I started drinking at five in the morning, stopping at the Chevron for a pair of twelve-packs on my way into the neighborhoods. I parked my cast-iron-skillet El Camino on the street before sunup, and when the Altimas and Camrys and Lexuses had glided out of their fresh driveways to work and school, I cracked open my third beer, stripped off my shirt, and retrieved my paints, roller, and tarps from the bed. My strokes were always clean and steady, even after I'd crushed one twelve-pack and then the other, sweating beer and latex into that Martian air, sheetrock and razed earth: no streaks, no bubbles, no shakes. But a mole on my left shoulder amassed to a small tender meatball I had to have sliced off, and my doctor suggested I start working somewhere air-conditioned. Beneath his flashlight, the whites of my eyes had the tinge of weak sunsets. My piss ran amber into the sample cup. That doctor knew—they all know—it wasn't the heat.

So now I manage the store. After work I paint—I mean I paint paintings, sunsets and beaches and angels. This is how I get closer to my Higher Power. I can't get into the books, or the CDs, or the books on CDs, so I paint. On warm evenings I go out into the yard and set a giant pitcher of tea on a stool beside my easel. I paint Virgin Marys, sailboats, sunbathers, lambs and lions, until the sweat squeezes the brush out of my hand and my heart thunks from the tea and the pylons up the hill flick their red chips into the dusk. I still like to sweat—the sense of my body rinsing out all of one thing.

I didn't lose my wife to drinking, the way I often hear in the rooms. Actually Sheila served me papers when I was coming up on a year sober. A card with a train of rats in party hats (“Conga-Rats!”) followed soon in the mail. The split was amicable, in its way. “One day my tiredness just swallowed up my anger,” she told me, “and then I was free.” We still see a good bit of each other. She cooks meals for the Methodists whose fellowship hall my group rents for meetings twice a week. On Tuesday and Thursday nights, Sheila bakes the lasagnas and shepherd's pies, and I brew the coffee. And never the twain shall meet.

A difficult woman comes into the shop sometimes. I never can seem to do for her what she needs. One time she wanted a copy of the key to her car, a late-model Cadillac. I told her the keys to newer models are embedded with chips we can't replicate; she would have to get it done at the dealership.

“I don't need the clicker part,” she said. “Just the key. I just need to stick it in the lock and turn.”

I said, “I'm sorry. That's just how it works.”

We called the dealership together. She gave orders, handing the phone back to me when we were put on hold. She's used to having things done a certain way. She's had to demand it all her life. You can see it in the way she strides into the shop with her eyes fixed in front of her, looking not at me but at the plastic boxes of screws behind my head. She walks straight to the counter and flattens her palms against the glass. "Hey man," she says ("Hey Harry," now that she knows my name—hers is Crystal), and tells me what she needs just as a man would, her firm voice pushing through the chrome-blonde ponytail and remodeled bust—one afternoon a green top patterned like the rind of a watermelon—eyelids, cheeks, and lips done up in faintly varied shades of edible pink. If something ever went wrong with her Cadillac, she'd march to the desk at the dealership in that same way and tell them what to do for a price she knew was fair. She wouldn't be razzle-dazzled, wouldn't take the runaround they give women.

Every time she comes in, she gives me the same sigh. "I just don't know," she says, "why you can't do this for me."

I tell her I don't know what to tell her, I just can't. I tell her I'm sorry.

I like being of use. It's the only thing that keeps me going. Being of service, as we say in the rooms. We have to keep being of service or else we begin to feel worthless, broken down, rained on. And then in all the cracks and grooves in us, the places idle and rusting, the old selfishness sets in, the restlessness and anger and despair. And then we drink. We begin to die.

Another time, her daughter's room needed repainting. She remembered the shade because she'd kept the can all these years. She brought it in, blistered with rust, and showed it to me. Honeysuckle Ash. It was a brand we carried. I spent an hour with her

among the swatches. We had plain Honeysuckle, a warm springy white, and Ash Bark, a granular gray, but not the shade she wanted. I gave her a defeated smile.

“Every time I come in,” she said, sighing.

I fumbled for some hope. “Why don’t you try something new?” I said.

“Something to surprise her. What’s her favorite color?”

When she met my eyes, I knew I’d made a mistake. Her face buckled but held its position, like a busted windshield.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

She was one of them, one of the parents. My skin became a colander, flushing out warm broth. My chest tautened the way it does at the bottom of a pitcher of tea. Stupid. You had to be more careful what you said after what had happened. But it had never occurred to me to think of her as one of them. I imagined them going around town marked the same way, with identical black robes, or a tribal scarring. But they all wear it differently. Some avoid the topic altogether. If you see them on the street, wondering if you recognize them from the news, they duck into the post office or pretend to be on the phone. Some will talk about it in plain terms, in public, without blinking. These are the ones who start foundations, initiatives, awareness campaigns. It’s easy to think they are stronger than the other kind, and just as easy to think they feel nothing at all. Some have already moved far away.

The day it happened, I caught the news at work, on the tiny TV I keep at the counter. I saw the elementary school swarmed by ambulances and fire trucks and police cars. It was national news, not local. The event had already picked up and blown to every corner of the country, even as it unfolded in real time. A customer drifted over from the

power tools and came around the counter to watch. “Jesus Christ,” he said. “Just up the road.”

Sheila called me that night. She’d been crying. “I’m just so grateful,” she said. “Grateful we never had any.” It was the kind of thing I’d have brought the house down on her for saying while we were married, but now I could see its purity. Not to have children was a mercy, if this was what happened to children now. They were not only being blown up, but also getting snatched by faceless strangers online, becoming hooked younger and younger on increasingly complicated drugs. Spencer, a friend of mine in the rooms, had a fourteen-year-old in treatment for snorting heroin cut with over-the-counter cold meds. A new guy—a kid himself, barely nineteen—was drinking by age nine, and something of a prostitute by fifteen. I guess these things have always happened, but as a non-parent, you’re immune. You don’t have that special fear.

For the rest of that day, the day of the Honeysuckle Ash, I roasted inside my clothes. I sweated through the three fresh shirts I keep hanging in the office. At the church that night, I lost my grip on a coffee mug and had to sweep its shards off the kitchen floor. Sheila stood crimping foil around a vat of lasagna. She turned her head at the sound of the mug, as if it had reminded her I was there.

“Something the matter?”

“Just work things,” I said into the dustbin.

“Let me guess,” she said. “The Implacable Miss Crystal.”

I said, “Did you know she had a daughter killed at the school?”

She slid the vat into the oven. “I didn’t. I only knew what you told me. The Cadillac, the breasts. Maybe it’s just my prejudice, but she never sounded like a mother.” She closed the oven door and straightened. “What a terrible thing.”

“It is,” I said into the trash can. “Terrible.”

“But I don’t understand. What does it have to do with you?”

She turned to look at me, pulling the oven mitts from her long-fingered hands. I didn’t answer. I couldn’t tell her it wasn’t what she’d probably always thought, that my dread of Crystal came from wanting to fuck her. I couldn’t tell her I was tangled up with this person and her disaster in some shameful way I didn’t understand, except to know I owed my services.

In the morning I looked up the number for the elementary school. I left a message with the secretary, who gave it to the principal, who called me that afternoon at the office.

“What can I do for you?” he asked.

I said, “Actually, I was hoping I could do something for you. My name is Harold Niles. I’m a painter. I’ve been thinking a lot about—about the tragedy, and I wanted to see if there was anything I could do to help.”

“Thank you for your concern,” said the principal. “Any outreach from members of this community means the world to the school, and to myself.” He said this in a level, mass-email tone of voice. Then he thought for a moment. “What kind of painting did you say you did?”

“All kinds. Houses, portraits, landscapes.”

“Do you have a portfolio?”

“Just things I’ve painted for my own personal enjoyment. Mostly expressions of my faith. I’m good with angels. I can show them to you.”

“Perhaps you could do a mural for us,” he said. “Paint it along the second-grade hall. I think the parents would appreciate that very much.”

That evening I slipped a stack of my smaller canvases into a manila folder and mailed it to the secretary. She mailed back the school’s yearbook, dog-eared at the second-grade page. The portraits of the dead kids and their teacher were haloed in Sharpie. It occurred to me as I looked over them, hovering now and then on a white girl with blonde hair, that I did not know Crystal’s last name. I could hunt for it through the receipts at work, but this was not a line I wanted to cross.

I kept the book open on my easel while I sketched out concepts. But the longer I looked at those faces, suspended in their pastel limbos, the more they impeded my progress. It was their specificity, the literalness of their haircuts and tooth-gaps. Finally I put the book away and began to work blind. As I saw it, everyone had lost a child: not just these kids’ parents but the whole town, even the people like Sheila and me who’d never had any. How else could I explain the almost civic shame, the complicit sweat that broke over me when I saw the look on Crystal’s face?

I painted the kids the same way I do my angels—with the whole human race in mind. White, black, brown, the whole spectrum accounted for. I made them the kids of the world. Hand in hand, they walked single-file out of the school, led by their teacher (secretly one of my angels in civilian dress). At the vanishing point in the landscape I blurred the walkway into the sky at a rift between clouds. Heaven. Why not? Who was to say every one of those kids and their teacher too had not proceeded straight there?

The night before I was scheduled to show my design to the parents, I couldn't sleep. I arrived at the school two hours early and watched from my car as a bus deposited a sluggish stream of kids in front of the cafeteria. I tried to study their faces. Children were never quite what you expected them to be. These were not the small angels I had painted; nor were they feral animals, fingers up nostrils, scratching and kicking and spitting at one another. I saw sleepy heads bowed, hands clutching lunch sacks and the straps of backpacks. They looked about six, but I had always been terrible at guessing. I thought suddenly about the morning a little boy had walked in front of my car. This was a few months before I got sober. I had just left the Chevron, and I gripped the wheel with one hand, reaching the other across the passenger seat to pry a beer from its plastic ring. My view of the road was slanted when I saw those spindly limbs tumbling into it. I do not count myself responsible for the immediacy with which I slammed on the brakes. The boy stopped squarely across from me. He planted his hands on the cast-iron hood. Something was wrong with him; he peered out at me from behind the face guard of a red plastic helmet. He was wearing a tank top and boxers, and no shoes. Somewhere around the corner I envisioned a mother and father in their pajamas, racing after him. I didn't wait for this, and neither did he. The boy brought his palms up slowly from the hood and held them there, as if performing a laying on of hands on my engine. Then he took off down the other side of the road. I accelerated gently, so stunned I didn't even check my rearview to see where he ended up.

Two things about that moment kept it bobbing back into my mind. One was the obvious: that I should not have been able to stop so quickly, that I should have run the boy down. The other was something I had not acknowledged until lately. It was the look

in his eyes as the hood of my car pressed against his belly: not terror, not the threat of tears, but a kind of annoyed curiosity toward the thing that had interrupted him, that he knew had the ability to hurt him badly. It was the boldness of childhood that knew just too little of danger. Now I wondered if Crystal's daughter had worn the same expression in those last moments of her life, if she had seen what was about to happen to her and looked it squarely in the face.

A cleaning lady unlocked the main building. I followed her inside with my easel. She led me to the conference room, where I was to meet with the parents, and unlocked it. In silence I set up my easel and canvas, draped them in a cloth whose removal I already knew would be too cheesy a gesture, a little too Siegfried and Roy. Then I moved outside the door and stood in the empty hallway, my arms folded like a bouncer's. It seemed a long time before the first sets of parents began to trickle in. I introduced myself, shook hands, expressed condolences. Most of them responded with cool gratitude. "It's so thoughtful of you to volunteer for this," said one woman, as if she were speaking on behalf of the others and not as one of them. They were dressed for the jobs to which they would return after the meeting: law, academia, banking. I had probably painted most of their houses.

The room was almost full when Crystal came legging down the hallway. As she walked, she passed a compact mirror swiftly in front of her face, then stuffed it inside her purse. Part of me wanted to stop her before she could come any closer. When she saw me, she did stop, blinking.

"Harry," she said, furrowing her brow. "What are you doing here? You don't have a kid here, do you?"

“No,” I said. “I’m the one who volunteered to do the mural.”

She raised one skinny eyebrow. “Oh? I wonder what possessed you.”

“I just,” I said, cutting my eyes to the floor, “wanted to do something to help.”

“I see.” She started to move past me. “I guess you don’t just do walls, then.”

“Listen.” I reached out and touched her bicep. She glanced down at my hand, then back at my face, not with outrage but with a simple incomprehension that was worse. I retracted my hand as if electrocuted and pushed on.

“I feel terrible about how I behaved when you were last in the shop. I didn’t know about your daughter, but I shouldn’t have talked about her either way. I was just sorry we didn’t have the paint you wanted, and I wanted to make it better, but of course I made it worse. I hope you can forgive me.”

I took a breath. Crystal’s face had set into the frown of someone who has steeled herself to hear what someone else has to say in the hope that he will then leave her alone forever.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said. “Excuse me,” and she stepped inside.

I had no choice but to follow her. The other parents had already taken their seats. They were silencing phones, taking out notebooks and pens, studying me with graduate-degree precision. Crystal, seated in the back, kept her eyes trained on the dry-erase board behind me. “When you’re ready, Harold,” said the woman who had earlier commended my thoughtfulness.

The introduction I had prepared evaporated. I cleared my throat and tore off the cloth. Necks craned slightly forward; pens scratched across paper and were pinched between

teeth. I determined not to look at Crystal. Instead, another of the mothers caught my eye. This woman had brought no notebook, and was dressed with intent to go immediately back to bed. She glowered at the canvas beneath thick black brows that threatened to merge in the center. In the fluorescent glare I thought I saw the shadow of a mustache. There could be no misreading her naked hate: not of me exactly, but of the whole proceedings of which I was a part. Studying the canvas, she alone did not cock her head or squint or stroke her chin, but remained frozen just as she sat. I watched her eyes widen to let out something vital. It was as if what I'd painted had done some quiet violence to her.

I failed those dead kids, and their parents.

“It was a nice gesture,” Sheila said, rinsing off a whisk creamed with mashed potato.

“You did what you could,” Spencer said later, as the meeting got underway. “You made yourself of service. The results aren't your business.”

But in the morning I called the school again. The principal was out, so I talked to the secretary.

“We've yet to hear back from the PTA,” she said.

“I know they hate it,” I cut in. “I'm sorry, I really am. But please, let me do something. Anything, I'll do it.”

I drove back to the school on a Saturday afternoon in late May. The same cleaning lady stopped buffing the floor to let me inside. The hall where the mural was meant to go was scuffed and swirled with oily fingerprints. One dark splash I couldn't help but think

was blood. Before I began, I sealed the spot with shellac primer. Near the base of one wall I found a child's sketch, a body shaped like a spoon, with a halo and tiny wings. I did not prime this spot. When I painted, the angel would bleed through.

I set out my roller, paints, and tarps. I worked slowly and in silence, one clean lemon stripe after another, no bubbles, no streaks. For the cubbies along the wall I switched to a pretty robin's-egg blue. In August, these would be taken over by this year's first-graders. More housing developments would spring up in the county, drawing more young professionals, more third-graders to replenish the empty desks. The parents would commission a mural they liked better, or scrap the whole idea and leave this hall just as I was painting it. In February the flag would be lowered to half-mast. Teachers would lead their classes out to the wooden crosses behind the playground and the principal would speak in his steady voice about what had happened. The kids who remembered might return for a moment to that scuffle and panic they had since learned to put in context, to manage with deep breathing and feeling charts. The ones who weren't there would know only that something awful happened here, and in its own way this would be worse, the sense of a violence just this side of knowing.

Crystal didn't live in town, or in one of the neighborhoods I'd painted, but twelve miles outside city limits, past long quilts of bean fields, on a whiplash of county road. Her property had no neighbors for a quarter-mile in any direction. She met me at the front door one morning in June, wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt advertising a fad workout lately taking hold among the town's young adults. Her face without makeup looked frank and accusing, like Diana surprised by Actaeon in a painting I had done the week before.

“Morning,” she said.

“Good morning.”

“Find the place okay?” She had already turned around and gone inside.

“Wasn’t too hard,” I said, following. “I just wouldn’t have thought you lived this far out.”

“I like my quiet,” she said, shrugging. “I like to build fires and hear crickets and not be bothered. And I wanted Drea to have trees to climb.” It was the first time I had heard her say her daughter’s name.

The house was a sort of cabin with a high, rafted ceiling and hardwood floors. The only literature in sight was a slim volume of Rumi on the coffee table, offset by two candles. Through a crack in a door I could see into Crystal’s bedroom: the sliver of a brass frame, a full marriage-bed quilted in starbursts of yellow and green, above it a sketch in primitive cave colors of a bare-breasted woman sitting back with her legs folded, staring up at some focal point I couldn’t see. Crystal opened the fridge, pulled out a head of kale, a carton of sliced pineapple, a handful of long carrots, and set them on the counter. “Help yourself,” she said, pointing at the fridge behind her.

“Nothing for me, thanks,” I said, though I could tell she didn’t care about my response. I stood by the counter and watched stupidly as she washed the produce in the sink, then fed it piece by piece into a juicer. She was absorbed by the act of dropping in a leaf of kale, a carrot, watching it puree. I felt less and less there as I watched her. I seemed to be breaking up, like the constellation of dust motes drifting in the sunlight through her rafters. Finally she flicked her eyes at me: curious, neither kind nor unkind.

“Do you really think you can make the color?” she asked.

“I think I can. I know I can try,” I said.

“Because I don’t want you to waste your time.”

“And I don’t want to waste yours,” I said quickly. But it was clear to me I couldn’t. She seemed determined to do everything as she ordinarily would, as if I weren’t here. She poured a brilliant green elixir into a tall glass.

“I’ll show you her room, then.”

It was down the hall from Crystal’s. A chalkboard hanging from a peg on the door spelled the girl’s name in cursive capitals. Crystal opened the door. I could not remember ever being inside the room of a seven-year-old girl. Except for the walls, the color of which I knew, I expected pink everything, or perhaps bare walls and floor, everything sold off or put away in storage. Instead there was a wooden loft bed with a ladder, the mattress covered with a Navajo blanket. Above it hung a feathered dreamcatcher as big around as a bass drum. By the window, on a table painted with zoo animals, stood a framed drawing of Tinkerbell in green and yellow Crayon. It was not an exact rendering, but the artist had caught the spirit of the character in the imp’s clawed hands and pointy grin. Crystal had cleared a wide space between the bed and the table for me to work. I set down my things and studied the walls. In several places the paint had come away in big flakes. A jagged continent spread between the dreamcatcher and the bed. Crystal’s mouth twisted. “She would pick at it, in bed,” she said, tracing the spot with her finger. “I’d get so pissed. I never knew why she did it.” On the opposite wall, a leak near the top moulding stretched a long gray finger down to knee level. I wanted to cover everything in some loud wallpaper, a print of bamboo forest or clowns. But this was not a child’s room anymore. I wondered what she would end up doing with it. Maybe it would become a

storage room, or a studio where she could practice her trendy workouts. Or maybe there was nothing you could do, and you had to keep everything the same always, as if the occupant would someday come back to you.

“I’ll see what I can do,” I said.

I laid out my supplies and sat down. Crystal stepped out of the room. Down the hall I heard a door shut, a rustling sound, then running water. I opened a can of sealskin gray and began to mix in dollops of white. A tap squeaked off; then I heard the light bump of a body settling into a volume of water. When my paint had paled to a grainy pearl I knew was still too dark, I dipped my brush and dabbed a swatch against the wall. I kept doing this, the swatches growing steadily lighter as they moved across the wall, ending with three shades that, to my eye, straddled the original one. There was an in-suck of water and then the metallic gurgle of the drain, coming in bars like music. Her body sloshed out of the water. I heard her feet padding down the hall. A few minutes later she came into the room wearing jeans and a halter top, her hair turbaned in a white towel. Her face was still naked, imperious, though the bath had relaxed her features somewhat. She leaned against the zoo desk.

“How’s it coming?”

“I think I’ve got three strong possibilities here,” I said, pointing to the last swatches.

She came over and pressed her face close to the wall. Her smell hovered near my neck: not soap or shampoo, just the smell of hot water. For a long time she said nothing. I felt the silence in all my joints.

“This one,” I said, “in the middle, I think copies the original color pretty well.”

“No,” she said. “It’s too cold. It’s like a hospital. What I want is warmer. This room used to take in all the light when the sun came in.”

I looked at the swatch and then at the wall behind it. *I don’t know what you’re talking about*, I wanted to say, tossing back at her her own words that had bumped around in my head every day since the PTA meeting. As if to defy her, the paint grew warmer in my vision, or maybe it was just the blood pulsing behind my eyes. Crystal stepped away. “No, none of those,” she said. “But, you know, thanks for coming out.”

“I’ll keep trying,” I said.

“It’s okay, really.” Her voice was strangely flat. “That color doesn’t exist anymore.” I heard her purse unzip. “Let me take care of your gas.”

The mention of money, heretofore unthought of, tipped me into rage. “I’m not leaving until I get this right,” I snapped.

She was silent for a moment. “Then we have a problem,” she said, “because you’re in my house, and you’ll leave when I tell you to.”

I kept my eyes on the swatch, like a child ordered to stand still in the corner. “Are you telling me to leave?” A pressure gathered where my throat met my stomach. I had not cried since the divorce.

“Jesus Christ,” she said. She sat down at the desk and put her face in her hands. When she spoke, her voice was level and horrible.

“Look, you don’t know me and you didn’t know my daughter. I don’t know what kind of complex you have about us, but it’s over, okay? I don’t have time for it.”

“Please,” I said. My voice creaked with need. “Please don’t.”

She exhaled sharply; it was almost a laugh. “You’re really fucked up, aren’t you? All right, go ahead, if it’s so important to you.”

She rummaged in her purse. “I’m going to smoke some weed, in case you care.”

I heard the muted flick of her lighter as I began to mix again. It took a minute for the smell to fill the room, at once acrid and cloyingly sweet. “I don’t know her favorite color,” she said after a while. “Can you believe that? I never asked her. It wasn’t fucking Honeysuckle Ash, I can tell you that much.”

“Why did you pick it?” I said. My voice had gone just as flat as hers.

“I didn’t,” she said. “Her dad did. Now he’s gone too. I’m left holding a can of paint.”

I willed myself to turn around and face her. “What’s your favorite color?” I asked her, like a child.

She took a drag and winced, holding in both smoke and question. Exhaling, she said, “Depends on the context.” She flicked the joint towards me; I waved no. She shook her head. *Suit yourself.*

“Maybe a nice teal,” she said. “Something oceanic. On our honeymoon we went to Cozumel. I’d like something like that.” She stared off to the side of me, as if watching invisible waves roll in.

“One second,” I said. I got up and walked back out to my car. I pulled a few cans of green and blue from the backseat, lugged them back to Drea’s room, and set them down on the floor. I cracked open a blue, then a green. I motioned to the wall. I said, “Show me.”

Limits

It was July Fourth weekend. Gray and Vincent were walking the square of their college town, waiting for Kim to pick them up and drive them to the lake. As they walked, Gray told Vincent the story of his last drunk. Vincent kept glancing at the courthouse in the center of the square. The building was a piece of antebellum kitsch: whitewashed and restored for its spot on the National Register of Historic Places, shrunk into snow globes and ironed onto sweatshirts in the campus bookstore. Through its doors Vincent envisioned a chain gang of cattle rustlers and barn arsonists, followed by their descendants, the publicly urinating frat boys and scrawlers of racist epithets on dorm windows. He could not picture what Gray told him—his forced entries and disturbances of the peace—not here, anyway. In the end Gray had downed half a gallon of Germ-X in county jail, trying to die. Like most self-administered poisons it gave him the worst night of his life but did not kill him. He lived to be shown mercy by drug court and released on probation. Now every night he stepped up to the chairperson at an AA meeting and passed him a court-issued slip to sign and date.

“That Germ-X was my price of admission,” he told Vincent. “I’m a free man now. I can go where I like and do what I like. Within certain parameters, of course.” He could not cross state lines or be out after midnight. He was perpetually beholden to a drug court officer. At any time of day he could be summoned to appear before a judge or produce a urine sample. Gray was 36, with the height, breadth, and baritone of a track and field coach. He covered a receding ginger hairline with baseball caps shoved wholesomely front and center. Today he wore a t-shirt with the logo of a vintage

chocolate milk brand splayed across his wide chest. This too Vincent had trouble squaring with what he heard.

A green Jeep pulled up alongside them. The red noses of two kayaks protruded from the open passenger-side window. Out from in front of them poked Kim's platinum power-bob.

"I had to get the fuck out of Oxford," she said as they climbed in. "Thank y'all for coming along."

Kim had come from Atlanta, where she'd resigned from a corporate law firm to enter rehab. She and Vincent were twins: despite their fifteen-year age difference, they had checked into Still Waters Chemical Dependency Services on the same day. There they had conspired against the center's ban on non-recovery literature. In art therapy they snipped whole articles out of magazines and smuggled them back and forth inside their Big Books. ("Here's that Lucinda Williams interview. Hurry up with "The Year's Best Desserts.") When upset Kim was known to sob violently for one minute and then immediately pull herself together, a perfectly controlled release, as if her tear ducts were doing kegels. She was limber and deeply tanned, fond of tennis shorts and *Life is good* shirts. Vincent did not think much about her age, or Gray's. Sobriety adhered to a vampire math; the rooms of AA gathered people restarting life at staggered junctures. At nineteen, Vincent could be the result of half his friends' teen pregnancies.

At Walmart they purchased carefully: Drug court was Levitical in its prohibitions. "No weird dyes, no vanilla," said Kim, moving up the aisle in a white sundress over a bikini. "Nothing that either contains trace amounts of an illicit substance or arouses reasonable suspicion that one is trying to pass a screen. Hence: no cranberries. They

should send out weekly recipes, like *The New York Times*. It would make my shopping much easier.”

Kim had met Gray when she started bussing tables at the bakery where he worked three days a week. After one punishing morning rush, the mostly college-aged staff had switched off the ovens and filed into the alley to get high, leaving Gray and Kim standing alone in the kitchen, flushed and flour-smudged. They’d been inseparable since. Now Kim inspected a tray of muffins for poppy seeds before tossing it into their cart. Vincent selected a pack of seedless hamburger buns, just to be safe. Seeds in general conveyed production and intent.

Kim drove them the 20 miles past city limits to the lake. She paid admission at a painted gate and crawled the Jeep along a campground set loosely with shade trees. Families crowded around rented grills in loud board shorts and string bikinis. Children broke off running for the tawny strip of sand and sepia water beyond. Kim breathed in deeply. It refreshed her to see so many happy black and brown children playing nearby. But she must be careful not to smile at them too long, or try to touch their hair. “We are not in Oxford anymore,” she said on the exhale.

Vincent pulled out his monogrammed towel, a graduation gift he hoped he hadn’t stained too noticeably with his own semen. The tanning oil he’d picked up at Walmart boasted an SPF of 2. “No, no, dear,” said Kim, passing him her bottle of Coppertone. She leaned back on her elbows and eyed the magazine lying on the towel next to her. At her feet Gray shook chips into a bowl and arranged the cans of dip—ranch, pimento cheese, buffalo—on a towel. He had lugged the kayaks from the Jeep to the sand, then hustled back for the food. He was an assiduous caretaker. The bakery opened at six in the

morning, and she woke at five to a fresh cup of coffee handed to her over the sheets, Gray already showered and the car gassed up. Now as always she took deep satisfaction in his care, but this was breezed over by a nervous guilt.

“I see you,” he said, smiling over his shoulder. “And no, I don’t need help. I’m doing exactly what I want. How about you do the same?”

“Fair enough.” She smiled and opened the magazine, skimmed a paragraph, and put it down. Someone was waving from across the beach. Shading her eyes, Kim made out the blonde hair razed to its dark roots and spiked, the skin melted and textured by drugs like runoff from a candle. Trixie sat in a semicircle of Still Waters grads who had gone into NA. They were, as a rule, more striking than the AA set: younger, racially diverse, more visibly warped by their addictions, more pocked and tatted and scarred. Kim doubted Trixie was waving at her. They’d fought at Still Waters, Trixie accusing Kim of stealing her prayer beads. Still, she returned the wave. It was a jerk response she couldn’t seem to break, waving back when her claim was most dubious. She looked down and saw Trixie’s true mark. Gray pumped his arm and sprang off his towel, streaking Kim with sand as he bounded off. At 36 he still hadn’t mastered the urge to gracelessly jump ship when someone he knew beckoned him over. He looked back at Vincent.

“You know these cats?” he asked. Vincent shook his head. “Come on then.”

“I am not a recovering faggot, I am a faggot in recovery,” said Cody, a densely inked boy in cutoff jeans. He nursed the last centimeter of a cigarette between black fingernails.

“Semantics,” said his neighbor, Javier. A cross twined with roses overlaid Javier’s vast sternum. Just over the waistband of his trunks were scrawled the words, “He is Risen;” on the bulge of his upper thigh: “It is finished.”

“How’d you decide which thigh?” Trixie asked, squinting at it.

He shrugged. “Just the way it was hanging that day.”

“How’s it hanging for you, Gray?” Trixie said with the battered camaraderie of a war buddy.

“It’s good to be out,” he said. “I was getting to feel a bit cagey.”

“Feelings, chéri, are not facts,” said Cody, burrowing the butt of his cigarette into the sand. Vincent lit one of his own. He wasn’t craving it, so it felt like a prop cigarette, a show of credentials. He became acutely conscious of his own unmarked and already pinkening skin. Even the razored scars along his legs looked stylized, amateurish. The NA crowd intimidated him. They gave off an intense pheromone, exhaust from steeper chemical roller coasters than he had known. Vincent had tried drugs, but he felt himself, culturally at least, to be strictly a drunk. He looked back at Kim, who was reading a magazine but seemed to be watching from the corner of her eye.

Gray said, “Y’all meet Vincent.”

They smiled in stagey unison. Cody extended his hand, pointed down as if there were a ring to kiss. “How rare: a fresh face.”

“Don’t pull that shit on my friend,” said Gray. “I’m sure you see plenty of new faces.”

“I didn’t say new, I said fresh. Surely,” he said to Vincent, “you’re not one of us?”

Trixie slapped his elegant hand down. “They may have repealed ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,’” she said, “but it still has applications.”

“It’s okay,” said Vincent, emboldened. “I am.”

Cody grinned at the two of them. “Y’all up for some volleyball? Drunks against addicts?”

It was the premise of an ‘80s bargain-bin comedy: AA versus NA playing for dominion of the beach. Vincent said, “I think I’d rather row for a bit,” and blew an emboldened needle of smoke.

The life vest rode up to Vincent’s chin, making him feel like a turtle. Gray shoved his kayak off the sand, then Kim’s. “You have to be gentle,” she instructed as they slid into the water. “Gentleness on both sides. Like two virgins losing it to each other.” She demonstrated with one shallow stroke to the left and one to the right. Her craft glided cleanly forward. Vincent stroked left and started lurching the other way, which was more like one virgin losing it to himself.

She looked over. “You’re left-handed too,” she said. “Go figure. Drunks, artists, suicides: we’re all lefties.”

It wasn’t what he wanted to hear while corkscrewing out in open water, but still it made a Darwinian kind of sense. “What should I do?” he asked.

“You do the hokey-pokey and you turn yourself around.” She paddled hard to the left and stroked into the skid until she’d made a full rotation. Every Sunday at Still Waters, the program director, a vigorous eighty-year-old woman, assembled the clients in the parking lot and led them in the hokey-pokey. Vincent had wondered whether one could, with immunity, put one’s contraband in and shake it all about.

In the end he moved by pushing too hard on one side and correcting on the other, weaving left and then right, like a snake on its belly. Far out now, they agreed how nice it was to be away from everything and everyone, where they didn't have to talk about AA. Then they began to talk about AA.

"I didn't stop wrecking my life with drugs and alcohol to spend it in a church basement, you know?" Kim said with a muscular flick of her paddle. "That's fine in the beginning—God, we need in the beginning—but ultimately it's a design for living. It isn't a life in itself."

They rowed in silence for a moment, but he could tell she hadn't finished her thought. He sensed it like an irritant in her throat she was trying to dislodge by talking. "Sometimes I just fucking need *more*," she said. "I need to rent a kayak, run a marathon, test my limits." She was rowing faster now and had far outpaced him. Vincent glanced back at the beach. Everyone looked naked, the kids with their shovels and the adults hunched to fling out their towels, like worms in a section of cut-away earth, extensions of a hive-mind burrowing back towards safety and darkness.

"You don't think you'll stop going, do you?" he asked her.

"Oh God no," she said. "I'm crazy enough as it is. I'm just saying, we have lives now. We should honor them." She shook her head at the open water, as if coming out of a dream. "We should head back."

Trixie unzipped her bag. Inside was a porous black pill with music on it. She set it on her towel and switched it on.

"Girl, what is this shit?" asked Cody.

"Nine Inch Nails," she said. "You don't know Nine Inch Nails?"

“Might’ve played on the stereo back home, when I was teething. In which case my birth-mom kept me too high to remember.” Cody grabbed the pill and fiddled with it until it produced Rihanna. “There we go, mama,” he said. “Follow me into the land of the living.”

She had a thing about people stealing her shit. Cody knew this better than anybody. He’d sat with her in group, heard her tell about the kids on the school bus who’d made a game of trying to steal her gum and potato chips, just to see how close they could get to her anger. Some of them, wherever they were now, were still walking around with scars from tacks and pencil leads. Trixie now felt what she’d learned at Still Waters to describe as a sensation of musical chairs: one chair had been yanked out from inside her, and the other parts of her were dashing around the circle, clawing for access. Even when she smiled, as Cody launched into a loose-limbed, hip-pivoting dance on the sand, her response felt tugged from her without her consent. The beat of the song was regal and insistent, a call to arms. Cody bent forward at the hips and braced his palms against his knees. His skinny ass, its limits traced by the fringe of his cutoffs, began to snap up and down as if attached to a hinge. Trixie had heard of this phenomenon, in passing; it existed on a frequency she could barely pick up anymore. As she understood it, the art was in keeping your body still while animating your ass, so it seemed to be moving on its own. With his stick frame Cody lacked the hardware to be entirely good at this, but his enthusiasm was drawing looks. Two teenage girls had wandered close. They giggled and whispered to one another, critical but not unkind. The taller one, wearing a sky-blue bikini and her hair in braids, began to tilt her head to the music. Cody was aware of his audience. The dips of his pelvis acquired a fluid, come-hither pull. Maybe the girl

in blue was impressed, or maybe she'd just seen enough. She stepped toward Cody, waving her hands out in front of her.

"I'm gonna have to stop you right there," she said.

He stepped aside, as if making room on a stage. "Come on."

The girl sidled up to Cody and began to move. Trixie couldn't tell whether she was dancing with or against him; she seemed to be using him as a surface off which to rebound. She tossed her braids over one shoulder, and anchoring her feet in the sand, backed her ass into him until he tottered backwards. Trixie's players were now stumbling over one another in a crazed passion. A loose crowd formed around Cody and the girl. Javier changed the music to something that seemed to be all bass and grunt. The girl dropped her hips and rolled her ass inches from the sand. Cody planked himself beside her and waggled his own back and forth. Just outside the circle of spectators, a young mother with a toddler slung over her shoulder was shaking out her towel, casting quick annoyed glances at the two dancers in the sand. A park ranger at the edge of the campground pulled a walkie-talkie off his belt, muttered something into it, and put it back. Trixie felt an urgency sit down inside her; her internal music stopped. She motioned to Javier for the pill. He was a happy master of ceremonies, grinning at the combatants from behind his sunglasses. "*Dámelo,*" she said. He cocked his head at her as if she were a mosquito buzzing in his ear. "*Dámelo,*" she repeated.

He sighed. "*De acuerdo, mama.*"

She stopped the music, walked over to Cody and touched his arm. His mania crackled around him as she came close. It zapped them both in the place where she touched him, each recoiling from the other. She saw it flash in his quick eyes.

“Man, why are you killing my vibe?”

“Honey,” she said evenly, with a glance at the ranger and the pissed-off mom, “you need to chill the fuck out, right now.”

The girl had stopped dancing. She studied Trixie. “Is this your mom?” she asked.

“Afraid so,” said Cody, sighing. “They say you don’t pick your family. Even when you do, it’s no picnic.” He stuck out his hand. “I’m Cody.”

She shook it. “Brianna.”

“Hi Brianna,” said Trixie.

“Come join us,” said Javier, slapping sand from his towel. The crowd began to break up.

“You see?” said Cody to Trixie. “We’re sitting down. Everybody nice and calm. You may now remove your nine-inch rod.”

“Ma’am? Ma’am.”

The voice had spoken three times before Kim connected it to herself. Her eyes opened on a world stained green by a nap she hadn’t meant to take. A tan, husky park ranger stood beside her towel, looking down on her with his arms crossed. She scrambled to a sitting position. She had the impulse to throw her hands, one of which still held a bitten and sandy burger, above her head.

“Ma’am, is he with you?” The ranger unfolded his arms and pointed a blunt finger out at the water to where Gray, a faintly detailed torso against the clouds, was still paddling his kayak. The scrim of tanning oil and sweat across her skin cooled to frost.

“Yes sir.”

“He’s not supposed to be that far out without a life vest. I’m supposed to give him a citation.”

Everything felt heavy, muted, slow as she lurched to her feet.

“I’ll call him in,” she said. “He’ll put on a vest. He just forgot, I’m sure.”

“He could have remembered to wear one in the first place, like everyone else, and I wouldn’t have to cite him.”

Kim studied the ranger’s face, its expression of stubbed-toe annoyance. She’d done things for cops before, things she didn’t like to think about, but always out of self-preservation. She asked herself quickly if she would do it now, for another person, and found to her surprise that she would.

“Listen,” she said, “he’s a good guy. He’s on drug court, he’s turning his life around, but if he so much as sneezes in the wrong direction, he could go back to prison. Do you really want to send someone to prison over a life vest?”

“I do not,” said the ranger, recrossing his arms, “have the authority or the desire to send anyone to prison. I do have the responsibility of making sure everyone who goes out into that water wears a life vest.”

“What’s going on?” asked Vincent, glancing up from his book.

“He can’t get a citation,” Kim said over her shoulder, running now. “He can’t fucking *litter*, man.”

At the tideline she called Gray’s name and flagged him down with both arms crossing over her head. She mimed a life vest by buckling empty air around her middle. Gray shaded his eyes and grinned, cheerful and uncomprehending, like a dog with its leg lifted. Kim planted her feet between Gray and the ranger and waved.

That night, in the cool fluorescence of the Methodist fellowship hall, they seemed to glow with retained heat. Vincent felt the private, shared aura of a clique. He thumbed one lobster shoulder and winced across the room at Gray, who winked back. The feeling was well-worn: the sense of having gotten away with something, of skirting trouble and still making it home in time for dinner. But this was shallow. Beneath it lay the feeling, old and unwavering but only lately apparent, of knowing better. He saw Kim wading across the sand, electric purpose in her slow limbs. He saw the ranger pulling out his walkie-talkie, saw himself watching everything, not moving from his towel. "I didn't do anything wrong," he said under his breath. "I didn't do anything wrong."

The meeting ended just as the fireworks were set to begin on campus. They followed the nocturnal tailgate of young parents dragging coolers, lawn chairs and sulky children onto the lawns. "I can't do anything, really," Gray was saying, not in protest but in cool resignation. "I have eyes on me to the ends of the earth." Kim repeated this to herself. *Ends of the earth*. The expression had lost all relevance, but was lately enjoying a comeback. The world's infinite ellipse and its possibilities had at last deflated, now that everywhere was charted, everyone made traceable. In the article she'd skimmed in her magazine, the location of a killer who'd faked his own death was triangulated to a cabin in Appalachia via his *World of Warcraft* account.

"I'm gonna call you Click-it-or-Ticket," she said, cuffing Gray on the shoulder. "Dumb bastard."

"At least I have a good lawyer," he said.

"You've got the wrong idea," she said. "I don't do pro bono."

They found an unoccupied section of grass and arranged their towels into a quilt. The JumboTron over the baseball stadium cast a wavering green aurora, smudging out all but a few stars. There was a whistle, and a silvery mane fanned out, crackling, above their heads. As if cued, their reminiscences began. Once on the Fourth Kim's sister kicked her out and wouldn't speak to her for a year; she'd shot off a Roman candle inches from her niece's face. Vincent reminded her of Still Waters' Fourth of July special, hot dogs with ketchup, mayo and berry Kool-Aid: red, white, and blue. The first firework's skeleton drifted in the air and was backlit by a smattering of green glitter. Gray searched each subsequent flare for a light into the past, but his memory was like the sky after a show, ruinous and soaked with gunpowder. With that sky stretching back so far, there seemed to be nothing between now and a distant memory: a little boy, five or six, crashing through night backyards with a sparkler in each hand. Feeling their stars kiss his arms; holding on in the fear and hope that they would burn down to the coiled fuse of his nerves and sizzle him up to nothing.

Johnnie Walker

Bridget did not remember opening her eyes. It seemed she had been staring blindly at the room for a long time, and only now, all at once, could she register its objects: the bookshelves, the window, the suitcase open on the rug and filling up with pale light. Was it morning or evening? She was not sure when she had gone to sleep. She rolled toward the body beside her, but the space was empty. Down the hall came the sound of running water. Her heart fluttered in her chest like a mouse's heart, the beats indistinguishable. Sweat slicked her forehead, ran in the ridges cut by her bunched panties as she slept. The pain came to her slowly. Hangovers she recalled from college, night sweats from recent menopause. Memories of each gave weird comfort, the first piercing instances of things that had since worsened but had lost their power to shock.

"Bridget had a mule, Peanut, kick her in the head back in Bay Springs. This should be nothing to her." That was Laney, her college roommate, a Jackson girl who inexplicably maintained a British accent their entire four years at Millsaps. She delighted in mentioning Bridget's Jasper County upbringing whenever other people were around. *"Actually,"* Bridget had said, swilling an aspirin with tomato juice, *"his name was Sweet Pea."*

"Order a whiskey and water," Laney had told her, on their first night out. *"You'll never get carded ordering a whiskey and water."* Where was Laney now? Long married, naturally, but perhaps with her maiden name in her Facebook profile, as a breadcrumb for old friends.

"Goddammit!" she heard from inside the shower. The tap twisted off. "What is it now?" she said to the pale room.

The door banged open. Jim stood behind it. He looked like an aging merman in a gay pride parade: salt-and-pepper ringlets matted damp against his forehead, mossy boobs sloping toward the algae-green towel he clutched around his waist. In his other hand he held her shampoo bottle, the cap off.

“What?” she whispered.

“Is there something you’d like to tell me?”

He tilted the bottle toward her. TRESemmé, for dry and brittle hair.

“Why were you using that?” Jim used Head & Shoulders.

“I ran out, Bridget, and so I thought I might use some of yours, rather than run to Winn-Dixie in my towel. That isn’t my point.”

She could smell it before he shoved it under her nose.

“Do you think I enjoy living in a house with no logic or order?” he said. “Where a man reaches for the shampoo and ends up dousing his head in gin?”

His voice had grown a menacing edge, but Bridget began to laugh. Her breath jerked in and out of her spasming diaphragm.

“It’s all very funny, Bridget. Especially with you just two weeks out.”

“Sweetie,” she said, covering her mouth, “why did you dump it right on your head? Who does that? You’re supposed to pour it in your hand first.”

“My shampoo application technique,” he said. “Of course, that’s what is at issue here. That’s the way this house interprets events.”

She threw up her hands, resting her case. Her laughter snagged on a cough and ceased. “I’m sorry,” she said quickly, before coughing again: louder, gagging. “I’m sorry.”

Jim left the room, exhaling through his nose. He returned without the bottle and crossed to the dresser to change. When he dropped his towel she would have laughed again, were her chest not still burning. Jim's ass seemed simultaneously to sag and to ride too high on his pelvis, vaguely squarish, like a squashed donut box. A pair of white briefs slid up over it. The way the frayed elastic tugged over the nubs of his hips filled Bridget with despair. What kind of man wore white briefs at 55? The same underwear she had bought for Vincent until he started middle school. She wasn't sure what men were wearing now; another man had not undressed in front of her in years, and probably never would again. She had cast her lot with tighty-whities.

He opened the closet door, took down a pair of slacks. "What time is Vincent coming over?"

"I'm not sure. He said he was driving in last night."

"Where is he staying?"

"With Gail and Annie."

"Whatever the boy wants, I suppose."

"I told him he could stay here," she said. "He still has a room."

"Surely you should be grateful he's deigning to swing by at all," he said. The more he spoke about her son, the thicker his voice ran with sarcasm. It made Bridget defensive, but with a backing of unease, as if Jim knew some truth about her son that she didn't.

"I told him he could stay here," she said. "Why doesn't he want to stay here?"

Jim's breakfast consisted unvaryingly of peanut butter spread across crackers rough with big seeds and grains. The sight made her stomach constrict; still, she insisted on sitting with him as he ate. There was an ascetic reward to it; it was a kind of

discipline. Sunlight edged above the mimosa, traced the wingspans of the two stained-glass birds in the window.

“Bridget. You need to eat something.”

“I’m not hungry, baby,” she said, patting his hand. “I’m nauseated. I don’t know why but I am.”

He chewed for a thick moment. “I know why,” he said. “Do you want me to tell you?”

“Why?”

“Because you drink too much and you eat too little. Your stomach shrinks and you fill it with alcohol. That sounds to me like a recipe for nausea.”

“Don’t you think it’s funny when people say, ‘I’m nauseous?’” she said. “If you feel nausea, you’re nauseated. Saying, ‘I’m nauseous’ means you induce nausea in others. It’s like saying, ‘I’m disgusting.’ Don’t you think that’s funny?”

“We’ve talked about this before,” he said.

“Well,” she muttered, “I think it’s funny.” Her voice was cold. She could feel it on herself, sealing her off from him, like a cold sweat.

She watched through the glass-paned door as he stepped down the driveway to the carport, pausing, as he did every morning, to look at the space his Honda Element had occupied until two months ago. A hideous, burnt-orange box of a car. She was glad it was gone. He placed his hands on his hips and surveyed the space, as if each time he expected it to be there and was stumped by its absence. Then he folded himself deliberately into the BMW station wagon he’d driven around Germany for seven years, over two decades ago. Wilhelm, he’d named it. What kind of man gave his car a man’s name? “Maybe he’s

gay,” Vincent, had speculated, at fourteen. Each time he left she thought it might break down on him while going sixty miles an hour on the interstate. It was neither fear nor hope; just a thought. He started the engine, backed out to the edge of the yard, and pulled onto the narrow driveway. Then the carport was empty, and the house. The A/C clattered on and blew through it like wind through a tunnel. Bridget waited a moment, then went after the shampoo bottle. As she suspected, Jim had poured it out. The toilet lid was up; she could smell it in the bowl. He had not even bothered to flush. He must have wanted her to lap it from the toilet, like a dog. She left it sitting.

In the dining room, in the rosewood liquor cabinet, a fifth of Johnnie Walker Black stood perpetually untouched, the seal intact. Bridget stood before the open cabinet. She saw Jim drink nightcaps of Johnnie Walker in the kitchen at two in the morning. She saw him come home from the liquor store, pull a fresh fifth from its paper sack, and stow it in the empty cabinet where another full bottle had stood that morning. But she never saw its amber tideline diminish, or heard the breaking of a seal. He dumped out her shampoo bottle, poured her vanilla extract down the sink, stuck his mouthwash up over the towel shelf where she couldn't reach; but he was never seen to remove the Johnnie Walker from its place, or lock the cabinet. There had to be another bottle in the house. She was not the only one who hid things around here. She checked its position daily, its constancy spiting her. It was like a reliquary associated with some religion that opposed all her human rights. Touching it would activate an alarm Jim had embedded deep in the matrix of the house, and a blank gray van would pull up to take her back to Still Waters, or the state hospital in Whitfield.

As if he didn't drink just as much as she did, if not more. As if he were not every ounce the alcoholic she was. Just because he could still get up in the morning, get dressed, and drive to the office; could last until six, when he fixed himself at the bar across the street with his contingent of drinking buddies who were Bridget's first, and glut himself with lager and nachos and mozzarella sticks, never mind what was in the crockpot scenting the darkened rooms of his house; could still lift himself from the table at closing and drive home slowly and carefully along the jolting North Jackson streets; enter into Bridget's light, fighting sleep (if he'd called and promised to be home by midnight), or her oblivion (if she'd given up waiting); no longer cursing at the first thing that offended his sight—a hamper of dirty clothes in the living room, the fridge door left open—but meeting it with a philosophical grunt, and falling rank into bed beside her. In the mornings she studied the sulfurous tinge along the rims of his eyes, like weak sunsets caught on windowsills, the craggy basalt of his nose. He was now heading the criminal division under the state attorney general. Everyone in his way had either retired like Bridget, or died. Jim's default ascension confirmed her belief that not only would he outlive her, he would in fact never die but merely petrify, the alcohol and nicotine and bar food preserving the tissues they destroyed, recasting them in stone.

A gray sedan tilted past the window toward the house next door. The sun caught its flank and searched her body. Bridget hit the floor on her stomach. The Johnnie Walker winked at her like a caged animal through the rosewood lattice. She heard the crunch of gravel, the pop of car doors, voices moving astride footsteps to a door that opened, shut. Then there was silence. The drop had turned her stomach; she gagged dryly against the dusty boards. “You shall crawl on your belly and eat dust,” she whispered. Then she

picked herself up, bracing against the cabinet, and crossed to the bedroom. She took a shawl from the open suitcase, pulled it over her nightgown, and went out the back door.

The sun was high now. It swarmed in the mimosa and over her body in a million tiny points of heat. Bridget cut her eyes to the concrete, watched her feet step over it until it turned to grass. Where the kitchen wall met the fence there was a little nook of bare dirt. She sat there cross-legged and stuck her arm beneath the house. An ant stung her finger as she closed her hand around the bottle; it registered as a tiny spark, no stronger than the sun on her skin. The bottle was still half full. Jim had stopped at every liquor store in walking distance, warning their proprietors not to sell to his wife. He did not know how far his wife could walk. Tonight, whenever he decided to come home, Jim would dead-bolt the doors and secrete the key somewhere in the house. She would have to make it last until then.

As she unscrewed the cap, she could feel the heat breaking up a little, the rattle of leaves receding to a pleasant wash. The gin burned straight to her heart, telling it to resolve into slow, red beats. And Vincent was coming.

If not the first lesbians in Mississippi to have a child by artificial insemination, Bridget and Claire were certainly close. A friend at the Jackson paper offered to run a story, but they declined. They were pioneers, not public figures, content to live quietly out in Rankin County, in a wooded, lake-dotted village that had once been a golf resort. They bought a cottage overlooking one of the lakes. Aided by a team of contractors, they mounted an addition on the house. They dug a pool, built a sunroom and a screen porch, laid parquet tile in the dining room, planted a crepe myrtle, fixed up the rotting pier. They pressed their big handprints and Vincent's toddler ones into the wet cement at the edge of

the driveway. Relatives long estranged, reinstated by Vincent's birth, flooded the place for holidays. Bridget dodged stepladders and tarps to roast turkeys and braise asparagus, laying out ancestral china and Waterford crystal. In summer she mixed pitchers of margaritas, assorted dips, and carried them out to the crowds of cousins lounging by the pool.

They met Gail and Annie, another couple, at a yard sale in Jackson. Gail was a flamboyant psych nurse with an affinity for do-rags, Annie a Cajun transplant who answered phones for a children's rehab. They had met in AA ten years prior and now lived together in a H.U.D. development in South Jackson. After the auction, at a Chinese buffet, Gail explained their situation without embarrassment, even, Bridget thought, with a flicker of pride.

"I love nursing more than anything in the world, except this little Cajun mama here."

Annie made a scoffing sound and gaped at Bridget, then at Claire, as if to say, "*Can you believe her?*"

"But I reached a point where I loved drugs and alcohol more. I stole Demerol from my patients; I came into the clinic so lit up on crack even the schizophrenics wouldn't go near me. Some patients, I'm sure, died who wouldn't have otherwise. By the time I went into treatment, my nursing license was suspended. You might as well have cut off my legs. I didn't know how to live if I wasn't taking care of patients. It took me five years to get it back."

As she talked, Gail spiked her water glass with three packets of Sweet'n Low and the juice from all five lemon wedges she'd asked for. She crowned the drink with a paper

umbrella from the vacated table beside them and sipped, beaming, as if it were a Tom Collins.

Annie's story was also riddled with voided passions that, in the telling, somehow exuded no bitterness or regret. Lanky upper-middle child of ten in a working-class Louisiana Catholic family; full basketball scholarship to LSU evaporated in a cloud of marijuana and cocaine; sister killed in a drunk-driving accident; a succession of transient jobs, half-remembered communal living arrangements, friends and lovers overdosing beside her as she slept. Her parents sent her, 27 and deathly underweight, to rehab in Mississippi, away from her home state's drive-through daiquiri bars and alcoholic gas stations. She never moved back. Before the children's rehab, Annie spent three years operating a popcorn machine at college basketball games to pitch in for rent at her halfway house. She spent days smoking cigarettes and playing spades at the AA clubhouse.

"I shouldn't be alive today," she said. "Neither of us should. We're grateful just to have a roof over our heads."

After a single dinner under said roof, during which they noted exposed wiring and four lizards, Bridget and Claire conspired to install their new friends in the cottage that had gone up for sale down the street from their own. The housing board consisted of a Baptist preacher and his wife, who overlooked the obvious terms of Gail and Annie's cohabitation, as they had for Bridget and Claire, because they were white and could afford the down payment. Claire came with her contractors to help them fix up the place. At break time, Bridget brought over gourmet sandwiches and beers in a cooler. She seemed always to be forgetting that Gail and Annie didn't drink.

As soon as the finishing touches were laid on their own house, the addition gleaming like a new prosthetic limb from the pier, Claire's truck was T-boned at an intersection in South Jackson at 9 AM on a Saturday. The other driver was a sixteen-year-old girl out of her mind on pills. Claire died instantly. The body was identified by her mother and brother. Bridget would not go in to see it. She allowed herself only to view the casket, Claire laid out in cherry-red velvet, uncanny in the drag of the dead. After the funeral, Bridget began to accrue the details against her will. They congealed in a composite picture on the ceiling as she lay in bed with nothing on her stomach but vodka and the morsels of grief casseroles force-fed her by family: Claire's face mottled with internal bleeding, shards of windshield caught like sleet in the sable cumulus of her hair, her body obscenely splotted with pink paint. She'd been driving to help paint a Habitat for Humanity house; the cans in her backseat had ruptured on impact, dousing the interior in pink. Vincent, then three years old, was supposed to have gone with her, but he'd peed through his shorts at the last minute and Bridget had kept him home to bathe and change him.

One afternoon, Vincent opened the back door and began to walk calmly and steadily down the street. Bridget was asleep in her room, the house's temporary occupants absorbed by the tasks of wiping, sweeping, spraying, calling, covering, and freezing that scatter across five or six sets of hands when one side of a household dies and the other half-dies of grief. No one heard the door open. Annie saw the boy out a window as he rounded a corner out of sight. At a brisk run she caught him, bent down and pulled her arms around his middle.

“Where are you going, little man?” she said. She must have known it was her house he was trying to get to.

Five years later he would repeat the attempt, barefoot this time and running, having found Bridget unconscious on the bathroom floor, opened both her unseeing eyes, shaken her head back and forth, and splashed cold water on her motionless face. Pelting through the hushed twilight that seemed to speak of a lifetime of orphanhood, he gashed his big toe on a shelf of asphalt, splitting the nail, and had to stop at the nearest house. The mother called an ambulance while the teenage daughter washed the blood and grease from his feet, splashed peroxide on the toe. Bridget woke into the orphan darkness alive with sirens. Gail and Annie saw the ambulance pass their house. They followed it to Bridget’s front porch, where she stood rigid in her bathrobe in the pulsing red lights, explaining to a technician that she was a very heavy sleeper.

That night, after she put Vincent to bed, she sat across from Gail and Annie in the dark kitchen, in the halo of the halogen lamp. She looked down at her hand on the counter, trembling on the veined granite.

“If you need a drink, Bridget, go on and get you one,” said Annie. “There’s no need to be embarrassed, not with us.”

She got up, a little huffily, as if to dignify her inability to refuse. The wine was all gone; she took a fifth of Bombay Sapphire from the rosewood cabinet and filled a water glass, no ice. She sat down, put her hand back on the counter. It had already stopped shaking.

“I don’t know how this happened,” she said. “You know I would never—”

“You don’t have to explain to us,” Annie said softly. “We don’t care how much you drink. You could fill up that pool with tequila every day and drain it through a straw and we would still love you.”

Her levity was like a spurt of oxygen in the airless kitchen. Bridget chuckled gratefully, covering her mouth. “I actually hate tequila,” she said.

Gail’s voice was harder. “But that boy back there thought you were dead. Hell, we thought you might be. There was no doubt in my mind who those sirens were for.”

“I’m fine,” she muttered. “I just passed out.”

“That boy is not fine,” said Gail, motioning down the hall. “He thought he didn’t have a mother anymore.”

“I’m sorry,” Bridget said, eyes lowered, like a girl in the principal’s office. “I thought he knew how to check a pulse. I did have a pulse.”

Gail leaned forward, enunciating. “He was in *shock*, girl. Do you expect a seven-year-old to perform CPR? Check your vitals?”

“No, of course, you’re right,” she said. “I’m sorry, that was dumb of me.” Still she couldn’t seem to let this line of thinking go. “But I know he knows your phone number. He could have called you, instead of running off like that.”

“Bridget, honey,” said Annie, still softly, but picking up Gail’s slow enunciation, “he’s a little boy.”

“And you’re a grown woman,” Gail cut in, “who can take some responsibility for passing out drunk.”

Bridget picked up the glass and took a defiant slug. “Do you think I wanted this to happen?” she said. “Do you think I picked him up from school and said, ‘I think I’ll stop

by Kroger, cook us some dinner, put on a movie, and pass out cold in the fucking bathroom? I don't even remember it happening."

"Who are you telling?" said Annie, chuckling. "We've been there."

"But we didn't have little boys to take care of," Gail said. "Thank God for that."

Bridget looked from one to the other. This good dyke/bad dyke routine was beginning to exhaust her. She took another swallow. "So essentially, what you're trying to tell me is, I'm an alcoholic."

"No one can say that except you," said Annie. "We're not here to diagnose you. We just want to make sure you and Vincent are safe."

"Mainly Vincent," Gail said. "You're an adult, Bridget. You can make your own decisions. But that boy needs a mother."

She drained the glass, gulping with a little cough, and set it carefully in front of her. "I suppose you two think you would be better qualified."

"He needs *his* mother," Annie said, glancing at Gail. "No one's trying to take him away from you."

"I know what you both think of me." She could feel the gin making her bolder, hear the traffic rush of her blood. "You think I'm this sloppy deadbeat who can't even take care of her own child. Let me tell you something. I am a practicing attorney. I have worked nine-to-five for the state of Mississippi for eighteen years. I support Vincent and myself on a single income. I send him to a private school. I drive him to piano lessons. I take him to the doctor when he's sick. He is well-fed and clothed. He is not neglected or abused. You want to call Child Protective Services, after one slip-up? Go ahead; I'll wait."

“If this happens again,” said Annie, “we might not have to.”

“I am all alone in this house,” Bridget continued through clenched teeth. “I’ve been a fucking widow for four years. Do you know what that’s like? Every night, just him and me in this empty house in the woods, with the trees slamming against the walls. I have PTSD; did you know that?”

“I’ll call Clyde in the morning,” Annie said to Gail. “He can come over and cut down some of these trees.” Then she said to Bridget, “Maybe you’d sleep better if you bought a gun.”

“This one here can teach you to fire it,” said Gail. “She used to shoot nutria rats down on the bayou.”

“I did not.” Annie gave Bridget that comical scoffing look from the night they met.

“A gun is the last thing I need,” said Bridget, “the way I feel, day in and day out.”

“There’s treatment for that,” said Gail. “Besides alcohol.”

“Sure,” she said, “put me back on Prozac. Let me stare at the ceiling all day.”

“She means talking to someone,” said Annie.

“I was seeing a shrink last year. She refused to keep seeing me, unless—”

“Unless what?”

She faced them squarely. “Unless I quit.”

There was a creak in the hall. Gail turned her head. Her face did not register annoyance or surprise; it moved seamlessly into a rascally grin. “What are you doing up, boogieman?”

Boogiemán. Only Claire had called him that. He stood in the doorway, his left hand fretting with his genitals through the pocket of his pajamas. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I was just getting some water.”

“*Couyon*, what did we tell you about saying you’re sorry?” They had recently launched a campaign against Vincent’s excessive apologizing, a habit Bridget was sure they blamed on her.

“Hey sweetie,” she said limply. “We’re just talking. Go on back to bed. You’ve got school in the morning.” Her voice sounded unnatural, a bad line reading.

Gail turned to Annie. “Why don’t y’all go and put on a *Harry Potter*.”

Annie got up slowly, keeping her eyes on Gail, as if hesitant to give up her soft hold over the conversation. Gail and Bridget now sat alone at opposite arcs of the halo. Bridget was going to need another drink. This time she took the bottle with her and set it on the counter.

Gail was the daughter of a Southern Baptist preacher and was diagnosed bipolar. When trying to make a point, she alternated between a revivalist mania and a tortured, pleading sincerity. She was playing in the latter mode now. Tears sharpened her small green eyes.

“Bridget, fifteen years ago my sister went into early labor in my apartment. She was bleeding all over my living room floor. I’m a nurse. I could have delivered that baby myself. But I told her to quit her screaming and get a towel and wait because I wasn’t done shooting up. And I love my sister more than anyone, except that Cajun woman back there.”

“I don’t shoot up, Gail,” Bridget said quietly.

Gail recoiled, her eyes glinting. “Aren’t you just a clever little girl?” she snapped. “Have you ever heard the expression, ‘Same shit, different toilet?’ Sorry, I didn’t go to Millsaps. You probably know a much lovelier Shakespearean quotation for that. The point is, it doesn’t matter whether there was a needle in your arm or a bottle on the floor. Your ass was dead either way.”

Bridget glanced over Gail’s head at the dark outlines of her cookbooks and hanging pots. She could not seem to marshal the knowledge that this was her house, that she could tell this scowling bandanaed woman to leave if she wanted.

“You would never speak to me this way if Claire were still here.”

“Claire would pop you upside the head for what you pulled tonight. You think she can’t hear me? Everything I’m saying to you I’m saying to her.”

“This is my house,” said Bridget, her eyes closed. “You do not get to speak to me this way in my house.”

“You will lose this house,” said Gail. “I promise you. It’s only a matter of time.”

Bridget studied her hand on the counter. The muscles were still, the veins still as the granite veins beneath them. “I know,” she said. “I won’t let this happen again.”

Last year, Vincent completed the journey. A team of drug dogs searching the dorms at his boarding school sniffed amphetamines in his desk. In keeping with the school’s zero tolerance policy, Vincent was dismissed. As soon as he’d collected his stepson from school, Jim put Vincent and Bridget both out of his house. The boy called Gail and Annie from a hotel room, begging to come and live with them. They drove up that evening and took him. He moved in with them, down the street from the old house that now stood abandoned, its furniture U-Hauled to Jim’s bungalow in Jackson, the pool

long drained, the pier decaying into the lake. They took Vincent to AA meetings. They taught him to drive a car. He got his diploma from the shitty public school to which Bridget had taken pains to avoid sending him, at which she now sometimes took petty pleasure imagining him amid the hot vomit reek of state-funded cafeteria, the redneck classmates who wouldn't care for his talents or sense of humor or delicate voice. Like every parent who tried to give her child a better upbringing than her own, she had always been unimpressed with his gratitude and had longed to let him taste the alternative she had spared him. But Vincent never complained, not to her anyway. When he visited her on weekends he spoke favorably, if sparingly, about the school. All the teen edge and whine left his voice. He filled out into his gaunt cheekbones and his face cleared. He traded his shapeless gray hoodies and jeans for a sleeker, brighter, more brand-named wardrobe, bought, she surmised, with most of the monthly checks she mailed Gail and Annie. His lank, shoulder-length hair, hennaed red by a classmate at boarding school, was trimmed and colored an approximation of its natural blonde. He had started on Wellbutrin. Bridget did not know what to do with him. She plied him with opportunities to bitch and moan, about school, about Gail and Annie, but there was a new pausing diplomacy in the way he talked to her. His responses no longer came hot and immediate as they had since he'd turned twelve. Now they sounded mediated, whether by some newly developed faculty of restraint or by the coaching of some third party—Gail, Annie, his therapist—Bridget did not know.

“He’s a young man now,” Jim said once, scotch in hand, as Vincent retreated up the drive toward Annie’s borrowed car. For once Bridget could not tell whether he was

being cruel. This sea-change in her son seemed timed and positioned to spite her. She was sure they took all credit for themselves, having kept him only a year.

Throughout his first year, watching Bridget feed him and bathe him in the sink, Gail and Annie had talked about having one of their own. They'd gotten their wish in the end, hadn't they? Waiting just long enough for Bridget to take the fall she couldn't get up from. Did they think they knew what it meant to be a mother? Did either of those meddling dykes know what it was to feel forceps scooping you to guide the life that caught fast in your pelvis coming out? The terror, neither selfish nor altruistic, but communal, as of two people caught in a collapsed mineshaft that was your body. For twelve hours she pushed and breathed, sucking the ice Claire shook into her mouth. There had been time to plead with God. *Don't let them take him out of me dead. Kill me, or kill us both.* When they held him up out of her gouged body, long and pink and outraged, he wriggled for a moment, sampling the air, then gave a thin sharp wail. She envisioned that her life had consisted of the planning of a city, the mixing of its bricks and irrigation of its water brute labors whose purpose she had despaired of ever learning, and here was the first bell spreading in clean waves from the church tower, bathing each roof, scattering the pigeons. She could have bled out into that sound. The one good thing she had ever made.

But they knew what it meant to be a mother. After taking him weekends and glutting him with bonfires and reality crap on TV and action figures and age-inappropriate movies and Hot Pockets and Mountain Dew and party-size bags of Double Bubble and Cheetos and late nights and bad grammar until he came home to her stomach-sick, crying with exhaustion. Meanwhile, who woke up at five in the morning to cook his

breakfast and pack his lunch and drive him into North Jackson for school, creeping along narrow country roads that dropped off into ditches on either side, when she could have let the bus take him to the shitty public school, let him eat slop from the cafeteria? Who kept pouring money into draining and cleaning and filling a pool he'd rather shut himself in his room all summer jerking off than swim in? Who spooned him in her own bed when he had nightmares? She remembered his small warm body curled in a space intended for a larger warm body, while outside the pines banged against the wall, jolting her out of sleep. Who cared about her bad dreams?

One Saturday when Vincent was nine, a clink of glass in the driveway woke her. Shaking, she snatched her robe around her and stumped to the closet for one of Claire's old golf clubs. She tiptoed to the back door and threw it open, the club under her robe. Then she recognized the form that stooped over a clutch of empty wine bottles beside the steps, slinging them one by one into a Hefty bag. A camo do-rag bobbed before her face.

“Gail? You scared me. What are you doing?”

“Girl, go on back to bed. It's Saturday,” Gail said brightly. “I just came by to give you a hand. You've got enough on your plate.”

She knew what they thought of her. Sloppy wino Bridget. Bad mother. Just let them try it.

When she saw her reflection in the bathroom mirror she thought of calling Vincent and telling him she was too sick to see him. Her face resembled a side of beef. Her concealer, capable with rosacea and burst capillaries, was not equipped to blend away the eggplant-and-olive spill across the left side of her face. It seeped up from

cheekbone to eyebrow and banked there, as if at a levee. No cosmetic could follow where it pooled into the eye, purpling the white. Bridget touched the discoloration and winced, though it no longer gave her pain. She drew back the russet snarl of her hair and gagged it with a barrette. Her face was now a stark clearing, a crime scene.

The light on the living room phone did not blink. It was still early; he would not be up yet. Bridget sat down on the sofa and took out her laptop, already open to her Facebook profile. She typed “Laney.” By the hover of her fingers over the keys, she realized she’d forgotten her old roommate’s last name. She hit enter. A rank of Laney’s came up, all with pictures and surnames she didn’t recognize. She befriended a few of them, trying her luck. It would not be beyond a girl who’d faked an accent for four years to assume a pseudonym online. Bridget could still hear her, as if she were speaking across the cramped air of their dorm.

“You don’t think you’re one of those trauma lesbians, do you?”

She could have kicked the bitch’s teeth in. Less than three months after it happened, and Bridget with her first real girlfriend, a solid, flannel-fond girl in the art department who never gave Laney cause to pry, never even came to their room, only walked Bridget to the stairwell and stood watching until she’d gone inside.

At the keyboard Bridget could access a fluency that had failed her in her speech several years ago. She typed quickly and with few errors. Her fingertips still bore deep-rubbed calluses from rattling off legal briefs for the state of Mississippi for 28 years. Her career had outlasted the electric typewriter and the clunky early PC, beginning at a sickly lit clerk’s desk in the state supreme court in 1986 and culminating two years ago in the criminal division of the attorney general’s office. “My mom writes briefs to keep the bad

guys in jail,” Vincent told his first-grade class on parents’ day. Often these bad guys were jealous common-law husbands who barricaded their cheating women in burning trailers; human refuse who pimped out their three-year-olds for meth. The occasional farce staved off her nihilism, the grammatically absurd witness testimony retold at the bar after work, the philandering penis cut off and mailed to relatives; but the daily substance of her work was numbing, duly processed evil.

Now she composed and shared paragraphs about her days: wry reflections on retired life, sketches of domestic incidents, culinary boasts. She thought of holding on to these sketches, saving them for a book, or at least a blog. A lot of books began as blogs these days. But the immediacy of exposure and response was too delicious to resist. Sorority sisters, mislaid relatives, old neighbors from Jasper County left comments praising her wit and inquiring after her health and happiness. They messaged her privately, concerned, when she disappeared digitally for thirty, sixty, ninety days. Their notifications fortified her: little red heartbeats, roses strewn across her little stage.

Occasionally the site would suggest one of her old gay friends she hadn’t spoken to in years. Gradually, once she started seeing Jim, all her lesbian alliances dissolved. Though none would admit it, lesbianism was just another sorority, only this one was man-obsessed in the negative. They would not tolerate Bridget’s tribal taboo, her breach of sisterhood. When she showed them her engagement ring, they winced as if she’d thrown a brick. Only Gail and Annie remained, pathologically loyal, dependable in exact inverse to Bridget’s unpredictability. It seemed they found some sense of duty in her decline that demanded they stick close. They offered to keep Vincent weekends so Bridget and Jim could drive to Columbus to meet his mother and sister, Biloxi to meet

her mother, Vicksburg to tour the Civil War battlefield. Bridget felt guilty taking them up on their services so often, sensing in this transaction a deep condescension and a thickening strand of debt.

“Let them take him,” Jim said. “I hardly think it’s an imposition, the way they’re always offering. Besides, you don’t want him sharing a room with us, do you?”

She typed out a quick status. *My boy is coming to visit me today. I can’t wait to see him.*

He came up the drive on foot, his new, tidy hair skimming along the bushes. He must have parked on the street.

“Jesus, Mom,” he said, mid-hug. “Your eye.”

She clapped a hand over it. “Is it that bad?”

“What happened?” He sidestepped her, to see between hand and eye. “He didn’t—?”

“No.” She stepped away, toward the couch. “I wouldn’t put up with that. I just had a little accident, sweetie. It’s boring. I’d rather talk about you.”

She sat down and looked up at her son. His face had lengthened at college, thinned out from its remedial filling-in at Gail and Annie’s hands, their biscuits and whole milk and mashed potatoes. He wore skinny jeans and a white v-neck, clothes aware of and conspiring with the shape of his body. Her son was sexy. The thought tickled her. “How’s school?”

He did not move from the doorway. “School’s good,” he said. “Freshman classes are a bit dull. We’re reading *Heart of Darkness* in British Lit.”

Bridget groaned. “Here, sweetie,” she said, patting the cushion beside her. “Come sit by me. I’ve missed you so much.”

He obliged, hunching to allow her arm around his shoulders.

“I can feel all your bones,” she said. “Are you getting enough to eat?”

“My meal plan gives me lunch and dinner.” He shrugged beneath her arm.

“How’s the food?”

“It’s not bad. Not as good as yours, obviously.”

“Do I need to fix you a cooler?”

“I’m fine, Mom, really. I’ve always been bony. You know that.”

She laughed. “Your mother has never had that problem. That’s one bad gene I failed to give you.”

“Actually I can feel your bones too.”

He’d stopped using that thick, pheromonal body spray. Without it he smelled only of clean skin.

“Not much has changed around here, has it?” she said.

“Not really. The people next door seem to be having some landscaping issues.”

“Oh?”

“There are tire tracks all over their yard, and someone knocked over that ridiculous arch in front of the door.”

“That’s funny, sweetie.” She kneaded his hand with her free one. “Would you like to stay here tonight?”

He paused. “No,” he said. “I don’t think so. I’m actually going to a meeting at five.”

“Well, you still have your room here.” She pulled her arm back to her side.

“I appreciate that.” There was that mediated tone in his voice again, as if he had role-played this conversation in advance.

“Are you staying with Gail and Annie?”

“I am. They send their love.”

She stood up and shuffled to the door. “Would you hold that thought for just a minute?”

“Going out?”

“I think I left the outdoor freezer open,” she said. “I’m just going to check.”

When she came back, he was standing by her wedding picture in the front hall. They had held the ceremony in the backyard, in front of the mimosa, on Halloween four years ago. Bridget wore a green silk dress and a witch hat. One of Jim’s bar buddies, a Methodist minister, had married them, his wife serving as photographer and sole witness.

“Won’t you come back and sit by me?” she said, huddling under a quilt on the sofa. She lifted the edge to let him under.

“My baby boy. You’ll always be my baby.”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“One night, when you were a baby, I was nursing you and we both fell asleep. When I woke up you were still sleeping, and my milk was dribbling down your chin. Do you remember that?”

“I couldn’t possibly remember that. I remember your telling me about it. That’s almost like remembering.”

He allowed his body to lean into hers, but kept twisting his face away from her face. She slipped her hand out of the quilt and reached for the remote.

“Your mother’s been watching a lot of *Law and Order*. I know that’s not very hip, but I enjoy it.”

On the screen, a young woman in a hospital gown was having grime collected from under her fingernails. “Doesn’t this upset you?” asked Vincent.

“Not really. I’ve seen worse, much worse.”

“Do you miss your job?”

She thought for a moment. “I miss having somewhere to go every day. I miss being busy. Now I stay cooped up in here all day. He takes the car and doesn’t come back until after midnight. Stays out all night at the bar and comes home stinking drunk—”

“Weren’t there two cars?”

“Jim, honey—sorry, I mean Vincent—I’m not allowed to drive. I’m not allowed to go anywhere or see anybody.”

“What do you mean, ‘not allowed?’ Is your license suspended?”

She shook her head, annoyed at this new direction. “He doesn’t like me leaving the house.”

“Why are we whispering?”

She hadn’t noticed herself lowering her voice, but she did not raise it now. “I thought I heard—” She watched through the door, but the driveway was a motionless grid.

“It’s just a car starting across the street,” said Vincent. “He’s not here.”

“Listen, sweetie: will you stay here tonight?”

“No, Mom. Thank you.”

“You still have your room here. This is your house too.”

When he spoke, his voice retained some of its former heat. “It’s his house, exclusively,” he said. “My name’s not on it and neither is yours.” He looked away from her and set himself squarely in front of the TV, as if pretending to be deeply engrossed in the show. The young woman was now leaning backwards into a full bathtub, her face distorting in the water.

“Oh sweetie,” said Bridget, sighing, “I just don’t know what I’m gonna do.”

“Why don’t you come with me to my meeting?” he said stiffly.

She imagined answering Jim’s perpetual goad: “*What did you do all day?*”

“I went to an AA meeting with my son.”

The AA clubhouse stood less than a mile away: a two-story yellow house that seemed to delineate the exact spot where their arty neighborhood, with its coffee shops and organic co-op and bubblegum-pink abortion clinic, sloped off into gutted strip malls, black hair places with barred windows, tree-choked phone lines, shotgun shacks with neon siding and trash in the yard. Bridget hated parking there, had always asked some grizzled old-timer to walk her to her car after.

“That’s okay, sweetie,” she said, patting his hand. “You go. I’ll be all right.”

“You have to get out of the house sometime. You can’t stay penned in here forever.”

She still had not raised her voice from a whisper. Her head was tilted toward the street. “He won’t like it.”

“Listen to me. I am not afraid of Jim Trainor.” Vincent smiled brightly, as if he’d just realized something by saying it out loud. “I haven’t been for a while now. Let me

take you to a meeting. We'll be gone an hour and a half. I'll take you straight home after."

"Jim—listen, I—"

"Vincent," he said slowly. "Your son, Vincent."

"I know, sweetie. I know." She looked back at the driveway. "Just let me change clothes."

It was strange, she thought, how quickly her body could unlearn the sensation of a moving vehicle. The screen-porched bungalows twisted past behind them, leaning into the flow of the street like river houses on stilts. The afternoon sun caught the pale hairs on her son's arm, which bent lightly at the wheel. It was her first time riding in a car with him. "I can't believe my boy is driving," she said.

He smiled at her. "I've had my license for a year and a half." Then he stopped smiling and looked forward at the road. At the intersection of North State Street, Bridget felt the car waver on its frame in the current from a passing truck. Vincent shot out into a narrow opening in the right lane. He slid into the left, inadvisably close to an intersection. Just like that, the romance shattered. Her heartbeat resumed its rodent hum, now with a plunge every minute or so, like going over a pothole. They passed an entrance to her alma mater: columns standing like the edges of a shut fan holding tightly folded its tapestry of wooded scenes. If there were such thing as fairness, Bridget's name would be on that campus somewhere, on a bench for some other shy redheaded girl to sit, dog-eared Flaubert in her lap, and watch Frisbees skim the air. Or on the Bradford pear-choked cinderblock of her residence hall, from whose pear-shadowed parking lot she had disappeared one Thursday night, unwitnessed by security, and not come back until

Monday morning. Her parents, timid, small-town pharmacists, had been too baffled by their mere proximity to the horror that surrounded her body, too resourceless even to sue. Her father injected her hysterical mother with Valium on the cab ride to the hospital. They could have owned that school by now. Vincent could have gone there for nothing, had he not balked at going to college just up the hill from her, from Jim.

The magnet high school blighted their view on the right, its severe lawn which neither student nor custodian ever seemed to trample.

“Could we stop at a gas station?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said, hesitating. “What do you need?”

“I know it sounds silly,” she said, “but I’d love a real Coke in a bottle.”

They pulled into a Texaco across from the school. Bridget saw the refrigerators, spectral through the store’s tinted windows. She undid her seatbelt.

“Coke?” he asked. “Anything else?”

He was already out of the car. Bridget felt a twinge of irritation.

“I can get it, sweetie.”

“It’s okay; I’m going in anyway.”

“I’ll get you whatever you want.” She clawed through her purse; her hand came up full of curled bills. “I’ll fill up your tank. I don’t have my card with me, but I’ll go in and put down some cash—”

“Mom,” he said, flatly. “Stay in the car. Please.”

They blinked at one another in the low sun.

“I’ll get you that Coke.”

What had Gail and Annie been telling him about her? Did they think she was incapable of walking into a store and buying a Coke? She was not a wet-brain yet. The car door shut behind his retreating back. His head was angled high, his shoulders pushed back self-consciously. Her own son, shutting her up in the car like a golden retriever. Already she was beginning to sweat. He had turned the car off and taken the keys. As if she might make a break for it.

A gray Camry slid into the spot beside her. From the corner of her eye she saw black arms bent lightly out of all four open windows. The driver's door swung wide. She listened for it to click against the outside of her door, but it didn't. A lanky boy about Vincent's age pulled himself out of the seat, wearing running shorts and a tank top patterned with palm trees. In his mouth a plastic cigarillo tip held a bright, disintegrating stub. He removed it and ground it into the sidewalk as he brushed past. Bridget felt his hip graze her door. Her mind began to count and peel away her layers of separation from him: first the car door, its coat of paint, then the metal and plastic, then her fingers gripping the handle. Next came her shawl, her dress, her bra and panties, until there was only her body, sweating freely in spite of itself, twisting rigidly away from the other car.

It was not this gas station, not this car. But it was this city and this geometry of body. Wedging herself against the door in that other car: a self-canceling defense, her body trying to protect itself with its own positions. It had happened already, all three times, if she could number it by bodies instead of by the blurring, continuous acts: the short one driving her car; the one behind her holding the gun to her back; the tall quiet one who'd raped her anally rolling down his window to smoke. Bridget had opened her high school valedictorian speech with a quote by Malcolm X, just to watch the stupid

custardy faces of her classmates and their families crinkle up at her from the gym floor. *You can't separate peace from freedom because no one can be at peace unless he has his freedom.* She was not the white bitch they were trying to make an example of. She had stammered something to that effect, when they shoved her back inside her own car in the parking lot, though it had done her no good, had sounded even to her like fluff, lines spouted from her own obituary. They approached a gas station. She wondered if they were going to kill her and she had to pee. She felt these two things together as one building pressure, dull and general.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” she heard herself say.

Absurdly, the short one pulled onto the apron, reached across her, and opened her door. “Don’t even think about taking your ass inside looking like that,” the one behind her said, digging the gun into her hip. “If they’re even open. Go on around back. We’ll have an eye on you.” She had only a numb awareness of herself as she stepped out onto the apron, marking distantly the knots rising in her face, the blood collecting in her jeans, running slick when she shifted one foot before the other; the tokens of things that had come and gone but would never be over because they had torn away with them every minute of her life up to this moment, and so defined these things as well: her walk across the apron, skirting the edge of the building, crouching as if to pull down her jeans before kicking off onto the median.

The boy in the palm-tree shirt entered the store. The boy in the backseat stooped at his window, looked her in the eye, and turned an imaginary crank beside his ear. *Roll your window down.* Bridget snapped her gaze forward. She concentrated on the tinted glass of the store windows; she thought she could see Vincent’s shape swimming toward

the counter, like a fish in an aquarium. Though she held herself rigid she was really sprinting, feeling something split like a white-hot envelope in her jeans, opening her to the helpless surge of shapes that seemed to carry her no closer to the road, its bright stream of headlights. The first bullet grazed her shoulder. The second lodged in her back, killing her perhaps, except she was still running, floundering now onto the curb. A passing car pulled over before her. A face gaped at her in disbelief.

The door opened again. Vincent came out with a plastic bag, switching it from one hand to the other to slip change into his pocket. He glanced once, shyly, at the other car as he came around to the driver's side.

"They didn't have them in the bottle, so I got you a can. I hope that's okay. Mom? What's the matter?"

"Get me out of here," she said through clenched teeth. "Take me home."

"What is it?" He looked again at the other car. The driver was getting back in; the boy in the backseat spoke to him, laughing, cocking his head toward them.

"Mom, they're not doing anything. They're just--"

"Jim," she said, "take me home right now. I mean it."

"Okay," he said, scrabbling for the keys. "It's okay. We're going home."

They went up the drive side by side, not looking at one another. Then, without saying anything, Bridget peeled off into the backyard. Vincent took a few steps toward the door before he noticed.

"Mom? Where are you going?"

"Just over here," she said, lacking the energy to invent a motive. She walked heavily, bent forward, toward the dirt alcove. She could feel him behind her, hovering.

“What’s over here?” he said.

“I don’t need a fucking shadow!”

She wheeled around, the sky a streak of jet trails in her peripheral vision.

Vincent’s face replaced it. His face first held the wide eyes and mouth of that frozen moment into which tears flow. His eyes then narrowed from disbelief, to offense, to disgust, to blue slits of hate. He turned, saying nothing, and went inside the house.

Bridget turned back and followed her path to the alcove. The sun bled through slats in the fence and banded her crossed legs against the dirt. Her head tilted up into the sky laced wildly with jet streams, lifting her out toward a sheer drop until the gin hit her throat.

The sunset she woke into tinged everything an acrid shade of orange. Bridget scrambled to her feet. She touched her cheek where the siding of the house had textured it. The driveway was still empty; the back door was unlocked. She found him sitting on the couch, watching *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* He did not look at her.

“Sweetie? I thought maybe you’d left.”

“No,” he said. “I was waiting to say goodbye.”

“Make yourself comfortable if you want,” she said. “You know you can stay here tonight. He won’t bother you, I promise.”

He said nothing.

She sat down beside him. “I’m sorry I yelled at you.”

“I’m sorry you saw something that upset you.”

She leaned her head against his shoulder. “I didn’t mean to make you miss your meeting. Will you be okay?”

“There’s another one at eight.”

“Good,” she said. “That’s a relief.”

She brought her arms around him and held him hard, until she could feel his blood going through them both in little kicks. “My beautiful boy. I did one thing right. Didn’t I?”

Staying Late

When Jim Trainor was six years old, his mother, Regina, went up to his room, stuffed all his toys into plastic bags, and brought them out to the garbage truck she had asked to wait for her on the curb. Jim was playing in the backyard. He looked up to see his mother's silhouette in the upstairs window, stooped over one of the bags. By the time he came around to the front walk, Regina had slung four full bags into the back of the truck. The truck's engine started, and Jim chased it for six blocks. It was a crisp morning in October in Columbus, Mississippi. The hunched spines of leaves cracked beneath his feet as he ran. He stretched out his hand toward the plush arm of a bear that had come loose from one of his mother's twist-ties and waved dementedly back at him as the truck picked up speed, spitefully it seemed, though the driver was likely unaware he was being chased by a little boy, and turned a corner. Jim walked the four blocks back home, sick with thwarted adrenaline. The leaves standing bright and sparse on the trees and strangling the gutters flared sharp and vascular against the clear autumn cold. He found his mother waiting for him on the front walk, her arms folded over her chest.

"It had to be done," she said as he came up the path. "Ruby could hardly clean in there. We had to make room."

"I would have thrown out *some* of them," he said.

"You would have told me every single toy was precious to you," she said. "We would have gotten nothing accomplished."

She favored the subjunctive with Jim, informing him of the inevitable bad behavior she had foreseen and intercepted. She left the roll off his plate at dinner because he would have eaten only that and said he was full. She declined to wake him the night

she went into labor with Caroline, because at the hospital he would only have been sullen and underfoot. Perhaps this was why later, as a history major at Spring Hill, Jim resented that tense's entry into class discussion. Had Charles Martel lost the Battle of Tours, would we all be practicing Islam? Had Hitler been victorious, would we all speak German? Jim rejected this hypothetical thinking on principle. He often repeated to himself a line by Aslan in *Prince Caspian*:

"To know what would have happened, child? ...No. Nobody is ever told that."

"Yes ma'am," he said now to the gravel at his feet, slouching past his mother into the house and upstairs to survey the damage. Without the softening contours of his stuffed animals, his room was a cheerless jumble of planes and angles. Jim could feel, without looking, Ruby's presence behind him in the doorway.

"Miss Regina didn't throw out *everything*," she said. Ruby was seldom indulgent and never conspired with the children. In all things, she was the extension of their mother's law. But now Jim understood that she'd saved him something. He quickened with excitement. Then he saw the stick horse propped between the bed and the closet door, a toy he'd forgotten entirely after playing with it once on his fourth birthday, a clump missing from its palomino mane. He looked the horse in its dumb glass eye and felt a wave of revulsion: not for his mother, but for Ruby: for being a higher priority to his mother; for having initiated this holocaust without even requesting it; for pitying him with this sad, unloved horse. *Mother would put me on the garbage truck if she thought Ruby couldn't clean under me*, he thought.

"I *hate* this horse," he said, not looking behind him. He knew this would only make his situation worse, that he would be scolded and spanked for his ingratitude (by

Ruby), and then again (by his mother) for disrespecting Ruby. But the smart of the switch against his backside would be familiar to him. He would prefer it to the squirm of humiliation he felt now, looking at the horse.

“It’s a wonder you don’t hate women,” said Bridget when he told her this story. Across the bar at George Street, she placed her hand over his with a wounded look, as if she were a child too in that cleared-out bedroom, hurting alongside him. On subsequent dates he told her about a morning the summer before the garbage bags, when Jim’s father, busy covering the Bay of Pigs for the *Wall Street Journal*, called Regina into his study and told her it was time the boy learned to throw a baseball. Regina was then eight months pregnant with Caroline. Watching his mother, enormous in her polka-dotted maternity dress, reaching high as she could for his clumsy overhand lobs, squatting carefully and sucking in breath to collect the ball from the grass, Jim had the vague notion he had been ordered to kill her by slow and pitiful degrees, like stoning.

Later he told her about an evening during his sophomore year of high school, when his father beckoned him inside his study to discuss the army. “I will disdain you if you enlist,” Jim Senior said, looking over his son’s ironed-on The Who T-shirt, his sullen, mastiff-like countenance, the mushroom cloud of hair that even at seventeen could be called salt-and-pepper. “Which I’m almost certain you won’t.” (When predicting his son’s shortcomings, Jim Senior preferred the simple future.) “But if, having been drafted, you fail to obey the order, I will disown you entirely. There will be no home for you here. And Canada is a very cold place.”

By then the intimacy of these tidbits had worn away in Bridget to a more practical concern. “Have you considered talking to someone about this?” she asked him.

“I thought I just had,” he said, smiling, though he knew she meant a therapist. The question irritated him: not just its presumptuousness but also its implication of a professional third party in what he had seen as an act of vulnerability, something faintly erotic. What he had told her he told only to women he was seeing, and then only into the ebb tide of a night’s drinking. The morning after their fourth or fifth date, Jim woke pleased to find a woman in bed beside him and a little ashamed to feel a childhood anecdote still furry on his tongue, having little idea why he had shared it. Had he finally become so useless with women that he had abandoned seduction altogether and settled for pity? This thought propelled him to the bathroom to douse his face in cold water. A snapshot of Bridget’s face melting into sympathy flashed back from the inside of the sink, papered over with similar expressions on other women with whom he had unburdened himself. He didn’t like to over-consider his motives in this respect. He liked to think that, deep down, he was really a sensitive and forthcoming person, but that these qualities stayed properly tucked and girded most of the time, loosened only by a handful of drinks.

He felt he knew already what a psychiatrist would tell him. A shrink would route Jim’s lifelong distrust of women, his discomfort around men, to the trusty wellspring of his parents. He would trace Jim’s Spartan apartment and office, his Mission-style furniture and Andrew Wyeth prints, even his coveting of certain items in the astronomy catalog that came in the mail each month—how he would circle a particularly sexy LED globe or Newton’s cradle and flip to it again and again with a mounting, druggy anticipation until he’d built up the resolve to order it; his sense of infinite calm in placing the item on its clean shelf and letting it spin or tap or glow, knowing it was his and no

one was going to take it from him—right back to the afternoon of the garbage bags. But these were facile connections, offering nothing useful to one’s life except a sense of symmetry.

Bridget had been working in the Mississippi attorney general’s office a few months longer than he, almost three years. Still, they had never spoken until she moved offices to his suite. Jim was accustomed to staying late at the office. It seemed he was only able to really focus when he was sure everyone else had gone home for the night. He was surprised, and a little annoyed, to hear a light knock at his door one evening. He recognized the woman in the doorway, but only peripherally, from the staff photo taken on the steps of the Capitol building. Her name escaped him.

“I’m sorry to bother you.” She spoke in a cool whisper. Even if he had been angry to be interrupted by an attractive woman, this would have soothed him to compliance. “It just looks like we’re the only ones left. I wonder if I could borrow you for a minute.”

He doubted there was anything suggestive in this request. Her shy voice and bright, nervous face seemed to belie a capacity for innuendo. Still, Jim felt a pleasant plunge in his stomach. “Certainly.”

She had stayed late to finish unpacking her office. She was about to hang a print and wanted to make sure she got it straight. “I won’t know the difference,” she said, “but on some level it’ll bother me.”

Jim was struck by the abrupt shift in atmosphere from his own office: it was as if he’d stepped into a different building. Even with several cardboard boxes still unpacked and the boards of a dismantled bookshelf piled in one corner, it contained a welcoming, lived-in aura. A rock fountain perched on the desk beside vials of lavender and ylang-

ylang that, though stoppered, seemed to diffuse their musky essence throughout the room. A hunk of amethyst on the windowsill caught the failing sunlight beyond the Capitol building. Titles stacked across the floor advertised feng shui, aromatherapy, confessional poetry; beside her nameplate, BRIDGET DELANEY, a faux stone placard engraved BLESSED BE. Jim felt vaguely embarrassed by all of Bridget's kitsch—it suggested an affinity for mail-order catalogs less cerebral, more hippie than his own—though he had to admit a concurrent feeling of comfort among her things. They seemed to offer the controller of this space the same stability Jim's objects gave him.

The print in question was a Japanese screen of songbirds in a magnolia tree. Jim borrowed her hammer and a stud, helped her pick a spot on the wall. He stood behind her as she adjusted the frame, paying less attention to its lines than to the firm, deliberate line of her back. She was wearing one of those women's jackets the cut of which mimicked shoulder pads. Her red curls were cinched by a chunky gold barrette that would have looked at home on a Minoan noblewoman. Her skin, where it wasn't covered by jacket or skirt or hose, was so fair it was almost translucent, water-colored with freckles and veins.

"How's that?" she asked, her back still turned. Jim tried to refocus on the print. He realized he was no more qualified a judge than she. He had no innate sense of organization or balance. More than once he had buttoned his shirt unevenly and not noticed until Dawn, the office secretary, pointed it out.

"Looks good to me," he said. She took a few steps back to stand beside him. They looked together in silence, like fellow visitors at a gallery. Jim would return to this moment many times, the first of countless others in which the consensus of two on what was straight or crooked, what looked correct, the underserved democracy of relationships,

seemed hopelessly flawed. In the end you could only look across to the other person and hope to find some assurance reflected there. Bridget smiled back at him. “I think so too,” she said.

He stayed to help her assemble the bookcase, shelve her books, plug in the rock fountain (with her narrower frame, she finally had to squeeze behind the desk and do it herself, but she appreciated his effort), unpack her typewriter, and break down her empty boxes. Before each task she apologized for taking up his time and asked him if he really didn't mind, until he began to wonder if she heard him insisting over and over that he was happy to do it. When they had finished, she sat on the floor with her legs tucked under her. She had taken off her heels. Her feet in hose looked toeless, mermaid-like.

“It's late,” Jim said.

Bridget appeared shocked by this. Her eyes flicked to the newly hung clock, then to the darkened window. Her voice was curiously hoarse. “Were you planning on staying later?”

“Not particularly,” he said. His stomach plunged again. “Why do you ask?”

Bridget's eyes hadn't left the window. She worried her cast-off barrette in one hand.

“I was just wondering if you'd mind walking me to my car.”

He tried to disguise his disappointment. “Oh. Of course.”

They rode the elevator in silence. After the cooperative tasks of setting up the office, they seemed to have come awkwardly apart. Jim's hands and throat felt unoccupied, stalled. Neither spoke as they crossed the garage, listening to its chthonic

electrical hum, until Bridget stopped and said, “This is me.” She put out her hand toward the door, then let it drop. She looked back at him and shook her head, laughing.

“Actually,” she said, “I don’t know about you, but I could go for a drink.” She laughed again, as if this were the ditziest suggestion in the world.

By some reverse serendipity they had attended Ole Miss’ law school during the same years, rented apartments on the same streets, and never met, only now parsing the classes in which they must have sat within arm’s length, bars each had haunted unconscious of the other. This fact puzzled Jim even after it had long fossilized into the backstory they told to friends and family. Why had he never noticed Bridget Delaney? She was easily the sharpest woman in the office, and if not exactly beautiful she was pretty in a startled, startling way, like a doe staring at him across a trail, poised to whisk off at the snap of a twig. Even her laugh, light and breathy, sounded as if it were about to flit away from him.

Their lives held a pleasing symmetry. Each had grown up in Mississippi under an authoritarian mother, aided in affection (and cooking) by black help. She told him how her adored Bobbie had warmed her cloth diapers by pinning them to the radiator. He told her about the night Regina had begged Jim Sr. to collect Ruby from the county jail, where she was spending the night for drunken disorderly conduct. The jail was so close they could hear Ruby pleading from the kitchen window.

“What are you waiting for? We need her!” Regina had hissed, gesturing to the cat-food-smelling salmon croquettes she’d cooked in the microwave.

Each had graduated from a small Southern liberal arts college, one Catholic, the other nominally Methodist and notoriously secular. Each belonged to the cult of a

Southern writer, Faulkner for him, O'Connor for her. Each had one sibling. Her brother played bass for a cultishly popular bluegrass band in Oxford. His sister had just spent a year interning with a ballet company in St. Petersburg.

Her parents had owned a pharmacy in featureless Lyon, Mississippi. After school Bridget stood at the counter, ringing up her classmates' mothers for aspirin, lipstick, and caramels. Her mother, Eve, enrolled her in ballet lessons when she was too young for this to constitute a breach of free will. This provided grounds for a long-standing war between mother and daughter over the Bridget's weight. Eve divorced Bridget's father while Bridget was in college; she now managed a stucco box of condos on the Biloxi beachfront. Bridget told Jim offhandedly that she hadn't spoken to her mother in eight years. He didn't know how to respond. Speaking to Regina was non-negotiable. Nine years after Jim Sr.'s death, she still kept up the old house in Columbus. She could be seen each morning in her canary-yellow tracksuit, hustling the three blocks to the Y, each afternoon in a man's shirt and slacks, walking the latest in a long dynasty of Cairn terriers. Caroline had recently flown back from St. Petersburg, weighing 88 pounds, and moved back in with their mother. She now taught Russian in town at the University for Women. Jim spoke daily to whichever of them answered the phone, and visited once a month with an obligation that did not need to be tested.

Bridget had been a competent dancer, but had preferred fiction. In the eleventh grade she won a statewide short story contest for young writers. The contest judge, a local poet-professor, later became her beloved mentor at Millsaps. She typed the mammoth first draft of a novel under the professor's guidance, and planned, with her encouragement, to apply for a master's in English. Then one afternoon during her senior

year, the professor summoned Bridget to her office, pulled a bottle of cheap Merlot and two Styrofoam cups from a hidden drawer, and offered her one.

“Greg left me last week,” said the professor, clarifying: “My husband.”

She had never mentioned Greg before. Apparently he’d made a killing in the stock market. “I’m so sorry to hear that,” Bridget said over the rim of her cup.

“Things are awful,” the professor continued. “Never in my life have I been forced to confront the material realities of living on my own. I simply don’t have the vocabulary for it.” She leaned across the desk, her eyes boring into Bridget’s surprised face. “Don’t make my mistake,” she said. “Protect yourself. For god’s sake, go to business school. Go to law school. Anything.”

The professor concluded her plea with what had become their benediction to one another: “Money and a room of one’s own,” jerking her cup aloft in the saddest toast Bridget would ever participate in. She finished her wine on the walk back to her dorm. The taste of grape and Styrofoam stained the tree-lined walks and squat, monastic buildings she passed with a cheapness, a hollowness not previously felt on a campus that had already betrayed her once before, and worse, but not like this. She stowed the manuscript at the bottom of a steel trunk and headed straight to the library to check out an LSAT prep manual.

“Did you keep in touch with the professor?” Jim wanted to know.

She grinned. “Greg eventually took her back, which gave her the creative freedom to write her magnum opus: an all-female adaptation of the *Iliad* set in and around New Orleans. The college press agreed to print it, out of pity I’m sure. She sent me an advance copy. It’s heinous.”

Jim wanted to ask next about her own novel, but he suspected she would not want to turn the nasty wit she'd used on her mentor against her own aborted efforts. In any case, she nimbly changed the subject.

“And what about you?” she said. “At what did you fail before you became a lawyer?”

Her sentences performed awkward acrobatics to avoid the misplacement of prepositions. It was such a fussy, librarian impulse that whenever it appeared, he wanted to seize her by the arms and kiss her.

“I was supposed to be a journalist, like my father,” he said. After Jim Sr. won his Pulitzer, Regina christened the house in Columbus “The Fourth Estate,” a title she alone of the surviving Trainors used without rolling her eyes. Jim had refused to humor his father even by writing for the high school paper. He returned early from a dig in Rome, the summer after graduation, to watch him die of emphysema. “Terribly sorry to drag you away from your vases,” were the last words he remembered his father saying to him. He liked to metonymize the entire discipline of classical studies as “your vases,” as if to say his son were a florist.

Though Jim had enjoyed distressing both his parents with the obscurity and impracticality of his chosen field—he was just as fascinated by the Third Reich as by the Roman Empire, but he made sure never to let his father know—classics had never been the big picture. Actually he liked his image of himself as a Southern attorney versed in Herodotus, Virgil, and Homer. It appealed to a lame Faulknerian sensibility that was now embarrassing, but no more so than many of his colleagues' backstories: political science majors who wanted to change the world, or at least the Constitution, and wound up

pushing briefs for the state. Jim had suffered no real interruptions, had no unfinished ambitions locked away in a trunk, though he supposed he might like to go back to Europe someday.

It took a few weeks before he felt comfortable asking what had happened with her mother.

“A litany of things,” she said, peeling the soaked napkin edge from around her wineglass. “But the nail in the coffin was when I came out to her.”

She glanced up, awaiting some prepared-for response. Jim cleared his throat. “Came out?”

Her answer came in Dick-and-Jane staccato. “I was sixteen. I was with a girl. I told Mom. She told Dad.” When he didn’t say anything, she shrugged and looked at her lap. “They were less than open-minded.”

Jim had what would later be termed “gaydar” in short supply. Growing up in Columbus, he and his friends had understood homosexuality to be something predatory and male: the neighbor boy at whose house you were not supposed to sleep over on account of his sadistic older brother; the monsignor who was rumored to be a little too helpful with the altar boys changing into their robes. Then there was Franco, his flatmate in Rome, with whom he shared a few disorientingly heated weeks, the memory of which still threw his mind’s-eye into a Dutch angle. They never touched one another, he was careful to remind himself, though something like touch had infused the rolling and crimping of gnocchi in their tiny kitchen, their drunken walks by the Tiber. Jim applied the same lens to his time with Franco as to the generals and emperors his classmates at

Spring Hill had insisted were gay. It was useless to assign a category to something if that category did not exist for you; certain things were gay only if you were.

Jacob, a colleague of theirs who worked to a low stereo hum of Edith Piaf or Marlene Dietrich, was known for his biannual trips to Honduras, from which he always returned, nut-brown and whistling, with souvenirs of hand-woven dolls or coffee for a favored few in the office. “I wonder if he has a lady friend over there,” Jim said to Bridget once. She blinked at him, astounded.

But even Jim could tell that the chemistry between Bridget and the tall, pearl-eared woman in the blazer and slacks with whom he’d seen her at the last Christmas party was something other than platonic. “Miranda,” she said, shaking her head, when he brought this up. “That was a crutch. I was feeling lonely and didn’t want to show up by myself. In hindsight, I should have brought a man. I would have gotten fewer questions.”

He was relieved that things with the heretofore nameless Miranda were not serious, and a little hurt she hadn’t taken him instead; but his real question—was Bridget a lesbian?—went unanswered, and he couldn’t see himself ever asking it outright. The first time she invited him to her apartment, he was painfully uncertain whether they were acting under the same pretense. This lasted from nightcaps in the kitchen right up to the instant she sank to her knees in front of him, taking his briefs down with her. He found himself increasingly conscious of how many drinks she was having. After three, her cheeks would break into a ruddy flush that she blamed on her rosacea and that he associated, stupidly, with Ireland. Four, and a pliancy would come into her limbs, which she normally held tightly to herself, arms folded, knees pressed together. She swayed at the bar to songs she liked; to those she loved, she actually snapped her fingers. Jim loved

this uncorseting of her restraint, felt privileged to be its audience, but it troubled him too. That an attractive woman, drunk or no, was willing to go to bed with him was no longer sufficient. Now that he was sleeping with a woman who, at the very least, had once slept with other women, it seemed important that her desire be authenticated.

“What would your parents say if they knew you were seeing a man?” he asked her one morning. She was getting dressed out of a duffel bag in his bedroom. They had been seeing each other for two months.

She gathered her curls in a chokehold behind her head. “I wouldn’t give them the satisfaction.”

His own family had been dropping hints. “You’re getting a gut, Jimmy,” Regina said during his last visit. “You can’t keep having pizzas delivered to your little pied-a-terre at one in the morning and expect a good woman to just *find* you.”

“Now Mother,” said Caroline, who since moving in with their mother had acquired her appraising, gimlet stare. “She could be delivering the pizza.”

“Don’t think you’re special,” she said to him when Regina went to the bathroom. “She’s been commenting on my recent *largeness* ever since I got back from Russia. She forgets she could have leashed me around the dog this time last year.”

He had wanted to tell them both that in fact a perfectly good woman would be waiting for him when he drove back to Jackson, a woman who quoted Dorothy Parker in conversation, who had the loveliest unruly red hair, who was an honest-to-God vegetarian. But something halted him. It was the same thing that had drawn him to Bridget in the first place, whatever it was that made her seem so untenable and evanescent. Of her family he had met only her brother, when his band played their

favorite bar. Gray was the image of his big sister subjected to a life of ascetic sainthood: red hair down to his ass, cheeks collapsed, semi-coherent. Over drinks after their set, he joked about kicking Jim's ass if anything ever happened to Bridget. "Duly noted," said Jim. At this Gray blew a Budweiser mist across the table. Bridget glanced down, flushing from crown to collar.

She had never introduced him to any of the girlfriends (here meant, he guessed, in the platonic sense) whom she brought up in conversation. *My liberal arts lesbians*, she called them. "I wouldn't subject you to them," she told him. "Besides, I think they see me as a bit of a turncoat."

At the office she maintained a breezy veneer with him. "Good morning, Jim," she said as she passed him in the hall, her voice cleared of the husky familiarity with which she'd said the same words beside him in bed that morning. Everything he knew about women (which he meant, in a Socratic sense, as "nothing") seemed to melt and blur around her. If a woman felt serious about you, did she not unclasp her life to let you inside? Would she not broadcast some unambiguous signal of her interest?

Something like a sign came one afternoon when they had been seeing one another for four months. At work she had behaved more coolly with him than usual, excusing herself from a conversation with Dawn when he came into the break room. The light was still on under her door when the office started clearing out at five. Staying late together had become their pattern. That way they could avoid being swept up by the happy-hour rush and go somewhere they would be alone. At 5:30 she had not yet knocked on his door as she usually did. Jim tried to mark up the brief he'd finished earlier, but his mind was

trained on the hallway for the sound of Bridget's door opening. Shortly after six he got up, crossed the hall, and knocked.

"Come in," she said. Opening the door, he wondered why the smoke alarm didn't go off. She was burning a dry, pungent braid of something in a clay dish on her desk. Her shoes were off and her hair down, which made him want to walk up behind her and vanish his fingers into it. Her expression, of the same acrid element as the smoke, stopped him. She was looking out her window at the government buildings jaundiced by the beginnings of sunset. He was reminded of the day they met. The lighting was identical, only now that the set pieces were fixed in place, he felt a weird lurch of nostalgia. He tugged suggestively at the shoulders of his coat.

"George Street?"

"In a minute," she said. "There's something I need to tell you first."

She tilted her head toward him. The glassy sheen of her eyes and the red patches on her cheeks were hallmarks of her second or third drink, though he knew she hadn't left the office all day. He didn't think anything of this at the time. He sat down across from her.

"I'm late," she said.

It took him a moment to parse this basic, elemental phrase. "Oh," he said then.

"It could be nothing," she went on. "When I danced, I missed periods all the time, from malnourishment. For all I know, I've knocked myself permanently off schedule." She gave a dry laugh. "But the obvious is far more likely."

He cleared his throat. "I see."

“I haven’t bought a test yet,” she said. “I wanted to tell you first, so we’d both be prepared for the outcome.”

Immediately he wished she hadn’t, that he had either been slammed with the definite news of pregnancy or never had to hear anything at all. “And if you are?” he said. “What are you going to do?”

She shook her head slightly, as if she hadn’t heard him correctly. “I’m not sure why,” she said, “but I didn’t think you’d ask me that.”

“Why not?”

“No reason.” She pinched her bottom lip between her teeth. “I just didn’t expect you to leave it up to me.”

“It is up to you,” he said. A stupid thing to point out, but it was all he could think of. Bridget nodded slowly, absorbing the obvious.

“Yes, that’s true,” she said at length. “But don’t you have some level of investment? An opinion, at least?”

He folded his arms and furrowed his brow at the floor: a scared pantomime of reflection.

“I think,” he said, “that you should do what you think is best, regardless of how I might or might not feel about the matter.”

“And how, exactly, might or might not you feel about it?”

The sun edged below a bank of clouds, turning the walls of the office momentarily tender and fleshy, like the inside of a mouth.

“My feeling is irrelevant.”

“Is that so? All right. What if I wanted to keep it?”

Her irises locked on him, green clamps. He had never seen her this relentless. She had been agreeable, even passive, about everything from which radio station to play in the car to his antisocial penchant for eating dinner at eleven or midnight. This, now, was a glimpse of what she must be like in court.

“Do you?” he said at length.

“Not particularly,” she said. “But I do intend to be a mother.” She let this sentence root and branch into all its attendant questions. When he didn’t reply, she continued. “Would it be right for me to end it now, just because it’s not convenient? Because I’m not married?” She laughed again, almost a snort.

“I don’t think,” he began, “that in this situation there are clear lines of right and wrong.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose in disbelief. “I’m sorry,” she said, “I thought you were Catholic.”

“I thought you were a liberal,” he fired back, aware of how childish, how petulant he sounded. Bridget fell back in her chair as if lightly shoved. A small scoffing noise came from deep in her throat. “Look,” he started, to stave off whatever she might say next, “there’s really no point in discussing this further until you know for sure. Right now it’s all hypothetical.”

“Not entirely,” she said. “The law is based on precedent, sweetie.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, it could be nothing now, but that’s not the whole point. I know I want a child someday. I’m gathering that you don’t.”

It was not a question that had ever occurred to him; still, he felt assured in his answer. “You’re right, I don’t. And honestly, I hadn’t imagined you would, considering—”

“Considering I like women?” she said, snatching up the edge of his thought. “Is that it?”

This line of questioning was like a skid on the road into which you were meant to turn, no matter how perilous it seemed.

“Well?”

He threw up his hands. Bridget lifted an eyebrow. This would not be sufficient.

“I mean,” he went on, “we’ve been seeing each other for six months, and I don’t even know if you’re...” For the hundredth time with her, language failed him. “Straight.”

She laughed. “That should be an easy fix. I’m not.”

“You know what I mean,” he said. “I’m still just not sure what it is you like.”

She jerked back toward the window. “Sorry,” she said. “I thought I had made it abundantly clear what I liked.”

This statement conjured, as he guessed it was meant to, a chorus of *yeses* and *that’s its* and *don’t stops*, all tapering off into a quick keening sound at a register not quite human. If Jim felt sure about one thing with Bridget, it was that she did not fake her orgasms. They seemed to take her so completely by surprise, leaving her no chance to mold their expression.

“I didn’t know,” he said. He wanted to touch her knee, her shoulder, but he knew that at some point in the conversation this had become impossible. “I had never thought about this, honestly.”

“You have the luxury not to think about it,” she said. “When my mother was my age, I was already seven, and Gray was four.”

“I think that’s hardly comparable. It was the baby boom.”

She removed her glasses and made herself look him in the eye. It was an obviously studied gesture, something out of a shy person’s guide to confrontation. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I care for you deeply, but if you truly don’t want children, I can’t waste my time.”

He returned her eye contact with difficulty. “Will you come and have a drink with me, at least?”

“I don’t think so.”

He planted his feet a little too firmly, like a stubborn child. “Then I’ll stay until you’re ready to leave.”

Even when they did not go out for drinks afterward, he always walked her to her car. But, “No,” she said. “Thank you. I’d like to be alone here for a minute.”

Knowing what he knew later, he would have no idea how she possessed herself to wait at her desk as the downtown cityscape passed from rose, to clay, to coal; to lock up her office and ride the elevator alone into the bodiless hum of the garage. It was ten years exactly to the evening she had disappeared from another parking lot, just a few streets over. Later, she would attribute the delay of her period to the distress of this anniversary. But Jim knew none of this then. She called him after midnight, something she never did, though she knew he stayed up until two or three in the morning.

“It was a false alarm,” she said. For a moment he couldn’t make out her words, if not quite slurring then thick with tiredness or tears. “Did you hear me?” she said after a moment.

“I heard you,” he said as his mind caught up. She wasn’t pregnant. He didn’t know how he felt about this. Relief was too simple a word for the removal of a link that, however undesired, bound you to someone with whom you would very much like to be bound.

“Good,” she said. He could hear her fumbling in the dark for her next sentence. “Thank you,” she said finally. “For everything.”

“Bridget.” He didn’t know what to say beyond this. Speaking her name would keep her on the line a moment longer, and he sensed it might be the last time he could say it when it would mean all of her, at least all the parts that were closing to him. He could feel a faultline opening between them. It was different from the one he had expected but no less final, so that, when she told him goodnight, he could already hear her voice the next morning, sounding just as far away.