

TWO BLADES COME TOGETHER: STORIES

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2005

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

Fall Term
2007

ABSTRACT

This collection of seven short stories details the emotional triumphs and complications of characters whose lives are altered by issues of sexuality and disconnection. An adolescent girl feels her father slipping away from her and, in turn, willfully destroys the imaginary world of the boy she babysits; a speech therapist struggles to make headway with a young patient while finding himself unable to communicate with his ex-lover; a gay poet cheats on his boyfriend in a desperate attempt to fuel his failing art. The dramatis personae of *Two Blades Come Together* is comprised of individuals who struggle towards grace and happiness but are thwarted by their inability to fit neatly into the lives of those they love.

Several of the stories approach these issues through the framework of contemporary myth, exploring how fairy tales and the supernatural act upon the characters' relationships and the way they perceive their situations. The heroines of "Proof of Snow" and "The Pill Woman" are both affected by the unseen; one suffers under the strange influence of her brother even after his death, while the other must make a decision to uphold her fairy-tale world or dismantle it. In these stories, the tangibility of the supernatural is elusive and unproven, but the altered perceptions of the protagonists and their actions because of it are extremely real, with extremely real consequences.

The collection also explores and tests the boundaries between poetry and fiction, pushing always towards language that is aesthetic and musical while not sacrificing the momentum and architecture of prose. *Two Blades Come Together* incorporates linguistic ideas from poets as varied as contemporary surrealists Laura Kasischke and Mary Ruefle to the grounded wryness of Tony Hoagland and Lynda Hull, weaving poetic language with narrative, hybridizing the qualities of fiction and poetry in an attempt to create a unique, musical vision of short fiction that is both functional and artful.

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CHAPTER ONE: PROOF OF SNOW

They started running out of food on the third day of snow, December 13, 1958, three days after Phillip died. Eleanor woke up and ran to the nearest window to see if the snow had stopped. It hadn't. A thick haze of white poured down out of the sky; she knew it would pick up into a blizzard by midday and roar on into the night. For three days, it had gone on like that, the house getting colder, the food running out. Every morning Eleanor pulled on her coat and boots and shoveled what she could off the porch and away from the windows. That morning, looking out into the white world and seeing nothing had changed, she felt like many of her students must feel, approaching the blackboard and throwing themselves at a proof they couldn't navigate, couldn't even break down. The thought of going outside to shovel the damn snow—pushing back an enemy that only replenished itself overnight—frustrated her, made her want to crawl back into the musty bed she shared with her sister Edith and go to sleep until the snow stopped and the phones came back up and Phillip had been taken away forever.

Eleanor checked the phones, just in case, and got nothing but a click. Fear leapt through her when she heard that click, the third click in as many mornings, no sign at all that the world was even there. They might as well be the only ones left, she and Edith and their dead brother. Panic surged up in the back of her throat, tasting of hot copper and blood, but she forced it down, forced the phone down into its receiver. She closed her eyes and forced it down, and then went into the kitchen and made a pot of tea.

Edith made light of the problem. "Don't we have enough for breakfast? I guess we should try and go for help. Tabitha DelRey is closest. Her house is just on the other side of

the woods. She could lend us some food.” Edith moved to the window and stared out intently, as if already mapping a route in her head.

Eleanor, the youngest, was visiting on holiday from the Canadian ladies’ college where she taught mathematics. At thirty-two she had never been married. Their house stood on a bleak stretch of weakly wooded land, miles from town. Only a thin brown line of dirt road tethered the Doctorow siblings to the outside world. They grew up in that house where their father was a suggestion rather than a presence. It was filled with his largesse—clothes and food and heat and books and a radio—but not his mind or body. He inhabited his law office in town like a roosting bird, all dark claws and watchfulness. He clung to that perch through the Depression, through the Wars, and through the death of his wife. Then, one hard winter when the snow piled so high it pressed right through the windows and into the Doctorow house, he curled up on the couch in his law office and died. As for their mother, she was half ghost, half memory. Eleanor was seven when their mother died in 1933. Edith was seventeen, the belle of her high school and gone as much as their father, always on a date or at a social or a dance or staying over at a friend’s. Phillip was eighteen, obsessed with listening to European broadcasts about Germany and sneaking drinks of their father’s booze. He hadn’t gone to school in years, and he didn’t work, but he still lived in the house.

There was something strange about Phillip. Eleanor used to think she felt that way because Phillip was so much older than she was. But as she got older, she realized that Phillip was different. He broke things all the time, yelled for no reason, and made strange noises. Sometimes he acted like a grownup and sometimes he acted like a little kid. He hid in weird places and threw food. He was almost never allowed to go outside. They made a

strange company growing up, Eleanor and Phillip and their mother. Their mother moved through every room like a light—that's how Eleanor remembered her, warm and gleaming like a lantern—and Phillip skulked in the dark corners of the house where her light just failed to reach.

Their parents never chimed in on the subject of Phillip's behavior. Once, when Edith was younger and still living at home, she told Eleanor in the late-night dark of their bedroom that Phillip had almost died when he was a baby, on the very night he was born. Edith didn't know exactly what happened, only that the doctor had to fight his way through snow to get to the house when their mother went into labor, and when he finally arrived, he found their father sitting in the living room sobbing with his face turned to the wall, and in the bedroom their mother clutched a tiny blue infant to her bare breast.

“So he was dead?” young Eleanor asked.

Edith shrugged. “Mama and Papa thought he was. He was born a full five minutes before Doctor Jurgensen even got to the house, and that whole time he didn't cry or move or anything. Then Doctor Jurgensen comes and takes him and squeezes his little chest and bam! He pinks up and lets out this yell that Mama says rattled the windows. And Papa comes running in crying and shakes Doctor Jurgensen's hand up and down, up and down, and Mama's crying and looks down into Phillip's little baby face and he lifts his arms up to her.”

Yes, Phillip was different. The times he looked and talked like a normal person for a few minutes were the worst, because Eleanor felt he tricked her into thinking he was okay, and for a minute she believed that something inside him had shifted and clicked, something that had been out of sync since the doctor slapped life back into his lungs as an infant, but then the clarity would drain out of his eyes like meltwater.

* * * *

Eleanor tried to convince her sister to let her go to Tabitha's instead. "I'm smaller than you," she said. "I'll be faster getting through the snow." She picked up one of their father's old fishing waders from its customary place by the door and knelt down to pull it on. The waders were the only thing they had that was sturdy enough for walking through such deep snow.

"Nonsense," Edith said, wrapping a red scarf around her stout neck. "You don't even know the way, Eleanor." She pulled the scarf tight around her neck, then bent over and took the wader from Eleanor, brisk and impatient, like a parent taking a toy away from a child.

Eleanor couldn't argue with this. Edith had been going to visit Tabitha since they were in high school together; even now, years later, both of them widowed and lonely, Edith made the trek to Tabitha's once a week for a cup of coffee and a scrap of town gossip. She knew the exact paths to take across the field and through the thin stretch of woods that separated them from the Del Rey property. The snow wouldn't hinder her. But Eleanor didn't want to stay behind in the house with Phillip. The house was too quiet without his constant sounds and movements, and the snow's pitch and roar echoed through it like the cries of an unseen beast. Even with Edith there, the silence filled Eleanor like dark water, weighting her down, suffocating her. And she couldn't stop thinking about Phillip, dead Phillip laid out in her old room, a homemade shroud, a homemade tomb.

When their mother died, Eleanor felt as if all light had gone out of the house and the world, and that the smooth wooden halls of their home were suddenly Phillip's domain. Father stayed away more, and busy Edith rarely visited, especially after she got married. So Eleanor read and went to school and grew up alone in the house with Phillip, always feeling

like it was never bright enough to see, never warm enough to thaw. She left when she was eighteen. When their father died, Phillip still lived in the house and refused to be taken anywhere else. When Edith's husband died, she went home to live with Phillip and take care of him, because he'd grown worse with age and couldn't care for himself.

Rumors about Phillip ran rampant through town. It was strange, they said. A grown man living in his parents' house, with no woman, no job, and no prospects in life? He never made it through high school. Some people said he was slow; others said he was a pervert, or that he had a heart defect.

Eleanor disliked speculation. It made things feel messy, imprecise. She preferred the crisp surety of a proof, clean black numbers on a white page. She dreamed and speculated and wondered with the best of them, but in she saw no reason to fill the air with empty, shapeless wonderings. Why shouldn't things make sense? Life wasn't all chaos and madness. There was a beautiful order to everything: to snowflakes, to death, to the Pythagorean theorem. She wanted to say to those people in town: *you don't know what it's like, with a dead mother and an absent father and your brother, your strange silent creature of a brother shambling through the house like a shade, watching you from corners, and nothing in the house but you and him and the sound of snow.* If she had to sum herself up in a sentence, in a word, in even an idea, she could only think of a blackboard at the ladies' college covered in sums and, beyond that, the sudden empty space in the house between her and Phillip where their mother used to gleam.

Edith set out immediately, before it grew too late. "Don't worry," Edith said, one hand on the doorknob. "The phones will probably come back up soon, anyway." She kissed Eleanor on the forehead and then opened the door. The snow seemed lighter than it had for days, almost beautiful, but the sky was deeply dark. Eleanor stood at the living room window as Edith stepped out into the snow, bundled in as many layers of clothes as she

could pile on, trudging through the knee-deep drifts in the waders. Her progress was slow but steady, until finally the bright red knit of her topmost sweater disappeared into the white. Three days' worth of harder blizzards obscured the ground, the sky, the distant trees. White and grey filled the window; Eleanor felt sick looking out into it, disoriented and lost, like she was looking down into an empty, bottomless void.

It had begun to snow the first day Eleanor returned home for the holiday. She unpacked her things and cooked dinner for the three of them. That night, as Eleanor and Edith sat drinking tea in the living room—Eleanor looking at the prototype of a new math text the faculty wanted to use in the coming year, Edith doing cross-stitch—Phillip came quietly into the room, laid down on the couch across from them, and stopped breathing.

At first, the sisters thought he was just asleep. Neither of them paid any attention to him until he shifted slightly and his arm flung out over the edge of the couch, extending out and down at a strange, limp angle. His hand flopped against the old wooden coffee table with a *thunk*, startling both sisters. “He does this sometimes,” Edith explained. She put down her cross-stitch and walked over to Phillip. “Just falls asleep in the oddest positions, then complains when he wakes up and can’t feel his arm or his foot.” She gripped Phillip’s shoulder and shook him gently. When he didn’t respond, Edith sighed and took hold of his arm, tried to reposition him herself. His arm slipped out of her grasp, flung out again, thumped the coffee table again. Eleanor and Edith exchanged a glance, puzzled, that quiet blank moment of animal puzzlement before reason and suspicion set in. Then Edith slowly reached down and laid two fingers against Phillip’s neck.

They immediately agreed that they couldn’t leave him in the living room, so they wrapped him in a white sheet and pulled the corner of it over his face. They carried Phillip

into the back room behind the kitchen and laid him on the bare-mattressed bed. It had been Eleanor's room as a child. She preferred it because it was always warm in winter; the room was so close and low that heat stayed there, trapped and circulating, a cozy buffer against the wailing winds and ice storms of New York winter. Eleanor retreated to the door and rubbed her hands. Edith leaned in and tucked the sheet firm and tight around Phillip's body, then ushered Eleanor out and shut the door firmly behind her. The room had no lock.

Eleanor picked up the black telephone to call Ralph Morganstern at the town morgue to come pick Phillip up, but a click greeted her in the silence. The phones were down. When Eleanor put the phone down in the receiver without speaking, Edith protested. "What are you doing? Didn't he answer?"

Eleanor didn't turn to look at her sister. "It's dead." With those words, the beginnings of panic stirred in her, distant and still disconnected, as if she was watching someone else. She tapped the phone with one finger, as if to make sure it wasn't faking.

For a moment, Edith stood very still. Eleanor wondered if they were thinking the same things—how much food they had, how long they could keep the heater going before it failed. That's where Eleanor's mind jumped in a crisis—to the solveables, the equations, the mathematics of survival. But if that was what Edith was thinking, she didn't show it. She shivered—from fear, from the cold?—and sat down in her chair. "Well, then. We just have to wait a little while, that's all."

The sisters sat in the living room for the rest of the night, the chairs hard and cold against their backs, keeping a silent vigil. Eleanor's math text lay forgotten on the coffee table. Edith's cross-stitch sat where she had left it, face down, the ugly understitches and tied-off threads showing to the room. The snow picked up into a blizzard; it howled and hurled itself against the house as night fell.

* * * *

The winter after their mother died, when Eleanor was eight, she asked Phillip to help her with her multiplication homework. She didn't really think this was a good idea, but no one else was home. Her mother used to help her with her homework, but she was gone now. Ever since she died, their father hadn't changed much—he was still aloof and busy, even more so—but he'd become intensely interested in Eleanor's studies, going so far as to look at her assignments every night and ask her detailed questions about what she was learning each day. He kept talking about sending Eleanor to a ladies' college after she graduated high school. "You need to get a proper education and a real job," he would say, often at the dinner table. Then, his mouth tight, he would glance at Edith, who worked for almost nothing as a shopgirl, and Phillip, who could barely even hold a conversation. If their father came home that night and saw that she hadn't finished her assignments, she would be in big trouble. So she gripped her book and papers tightly and walked upstairs, thumping her foot loud on each step to let Phillip know she was coming, so that she wouldn't surprise him. He did strange things when people surprised or cornered him—he'd bitten a friend of Edith's once, and another time screamed right into the ear of one of their father's associates who'd come over for dinner and accidentally walked in on Phillip while he was using the bathroom.

Eleanor knocked hard on his bedroom door several times. Phillip swiftly pulled the door open and looked down at Eleanor. The radio, which stayed in his room, blared out, and with it a blast of cold air. Eleanor winced. His window was open. Phillip stood there and said nothing. He shivered, but he wore no coat or jacket.

Eleanor stepped back and wrapped her arms around herself. "Phillip, close the window. It's cold."

He shook his head back and forth, slow and deliberate like an animal scenting the air. “Good air. Good clean air. White air.” He left the door open, moved back into the room and plopped onto his bed. Eleanor followed him in. Clothes and books and papers cluttered the floor. Some were things ripped out of magazines or books. Others were blank sheets covered in a long illegible scrawl that Eleanor guessed was Phillip’s handwriting. The whole room smelled of earth and snow. The radio was unbearably loud, more static than sound. She reached over to adjust the volume.

“Don’t turn that down!” Phillip shouted, leaning forward, his eyes wide. “Don’t down! Don’t down!” He quivered and gathered his legs under his body as if preparing to spring at her. Frightened, Eleanor pulled her hand away. She was no longer sure if it was such a good idea to ask Phillip’s help. Wind gusted through the open window.

Phillip pointed at the math book in her hand. “What is that?”

Eleanor looked down, then held the book open and out to him. “It’s my homework. Can you help me with it?”

Phillip cocked his head to the side. With his long bushy hair, he looked like an owl, blinking at her. He nimbly plucked the book from her hand and retreated to a corner of his bed. He read quietly to himself, mouth stumbling over the words. “ 5×5 is 25,” he said, loud enough for her to hear. He pointed at a problem farther down the page. “ $8 \times 7 = 56$.” He handed the book back to her.

“You know how to do this?” Eleanor asked. She looked down at the paper. The problem “ 5×5 ” was written out with a blank space next to it for the answer, and farther down the page, “ 8×7 .”

Phillip laughed, a weird adult chortle that sounded eerily like their father. “Child’s play, my dear. Child’s play.” He reached under his bed and pulled out a box; inside were

several empty glass bottles with elegant flower designs painted on them. Eleanor recognized them. “Those are mother’s empty perfume bottles,” she said. A memory flashed into her mind, sharp and bright as a new photograph—her mother getting ready for a dinner party with their father’s associates, a pink dress light and warm around her thin body, lifting the glass bottle to Eleanor’s hand with a secret smile and allowing her just a drop on her wrist. “You’re almost a big girl now,” she said. She must have gone through dozens of bottles while she was alive, and it looked like Phillip had saved them all. Sadness twisted through her, familiar by now and almost comforting, along with something she’d never felt before: a twinge of affection for her brother, who’d saved the bottles in the first place, honoring their mother the only way he could think of.

Phillip arranged six bottles on the bed, then separated them out. Two bottles lay to his right, two bottles lay to his left, and two sat in front of him.

Phillip spread his hands out. “How many bottles?”

Eleanor counted. “Six.”

Phillip nodded, then pointed to his left. “How many here?”

“Two.”

“And here?”

“Two.”

“And here?”

“The same.”

Phillip clicked his tongue against his teeth. “How many times did you just say the word ‘two’?”

Eleanor blinked. “What?”

“Two! Two! How many times? Two, two, two, that’s what you said.” He pointed at each group of bottles in turn as he said it. “Two. Two. Two. How many times?”

“Three?” Eleanor said, hating the upward turn of her voice.

“Yes!” Phillip clapped. “Two, three times. Three times, two.” He spread his hands again. “Six.” Then he pointed to the paper. Eleanor looked down. The first problem read: “ 3×2 .” Six.

Later in life, Eleanor could only describe that moment by comparing it to other things like it: the satisfying feeling of pushing the last piece into a jigsaw puzzle or sliding an old key home in a persnickety lock. Everything else momentarily fell away or thinned, grew invisible as the air, and all around her spread a black language on white paper, words and numbers fastening into each other like the cars of a long, steaming train. She looked up from the paper and smiled, beamed at her brother.

Phillip smiled back, clapped and laughed.

Then he picked up one of the glass bottles and hurled it against the wall.

The bottle exploded. Glass cascaded everywhere in a glittering shower. Eleanor yelled and retreated to the door. “Phillip!”

“Five!” he said, laughing, then threw another. Shatter, splash, tiny white diamonds of glass blizzarding across the room. “Four!” Another. “Three!”

“Phillip!” Eleanor screamed. “Phillip, stop!” She wanted to run to the bed, take the bottles away, but glass, glass was everywhere, everywhere.

The radio squealed and shrilled, filling the room with a deafening roar of high-pitched feedback.

Eleanor turned and ran downstairs. She spent the rest of the evening in her room behind the kitchen. She did her multiplication problems over and over again, even after she

finished the entire set. And when she thought she heard a noise outside, Phillip on the landing, on the stairs, in the kitchen just outside her door, she stayed quiet. After he moved away, she lost herself again in the cold gloss of numbers.

She was tired of Phillip's tantrums. He was always breaking something, or being loud. He acted like an animal. Her mother said to be nice to him, that he couldn't help it, but Eleanor didn't care anymore. Just last week he broke one of her dolls. He took it without asking and chewed on its hair. He twisted its head around and around until it popped off, then handed her the headless body and said "My apologies, madam." Phillip scared her.

Eleanor didn't even come out when her father came home. She shut out the sound of her father's surprise, the sound of a broom sweeping pieces of glass into a dustpan, and repeated times tables to herself over and over in a hushed whisper.

The fourth day of snow dawned darker than before. The snow turned briefly into thick sheets of water and ice, then back again. Eleanor didn't bother to shovel. She made the last bit of tea for breakfast and drank it by the open oven, huddling there for warmth. There was no more food. Edith had not come back.

Eleanor went out herself. She bundled up in every coat she could find and plunged into the snow, wielding a shovel and calling Edith's name through the whip and howl of snow, making sure that she hadn't fallen in sight of the house, so close to safety, too far to make it, weighed down by a bag of food. Eleanor shoveled all around the house, calling out into the storm, but she saw no sign of her sister.

Inside, she sloughed off her layers of coats and sank to the floor, exhausted and frozen and panicked. She felt a sob lodged deep in her chest, but she could not get it out, could not dislodge it as she sat there on the hard cold floor of the living room and gasped

for air, huddled into herself. She crawled into the kitchen and turned on the oven again, all but shoving her hands inside, anything to feel warm. Even as warmth reluctantly seeped through her, the sob choking her did not thaw; it stayed hard and frozen right under her ribs. Her heart throbbed loud and hard in her chest. She was alone. Phillip was dead and Edith was gone and she was alone there, with no food. Maybe the snow would never end. Maybe it would go on snowing like this, snow until the end of days, Phillip frozen into his cozy grave and Eleanor, his caretaker, a wight haunting the broken hulk of the Doctorow house. Colors spun, hazed; the kitchen blurred and sharpened. She kept thinking she saw something dark moving out of the corner of her eye, but when she snapped her head around to look, nothing was there. Eleanor leaned against wall and held her hands up to the blessed warmth oozing out of the open oven.

That's when she noticed the door to her room—to *Phillip's* room—standing open.

She blinked a few times, convinced she was seeing it wrong. The door had no lock, but she distinctly remembered closing it firmly, distinctly remembered seeing it closed that morning when she had tea for breakfast. But there it was in plain sight, the door standing half open, the light from the kitchen spilling into the darkness of the room, the edge of the bed where Phillip lay peeking around the door like a wary animal.

Eleanor shook her head to clear her vision. She stood, closed and turned off the oven, and went to the room.

He was there, his long body still tightly wrapped in the white sheet, exactly as they'd left him. The room smelled faintly of decay, that late autumn smell of leaves decomposing, only sharper, more rich. Eleanor wrinkled her nose and closed the door. She must imagine things. She was hungry and cold, and more than a little afraid of Phillip. He'd made her feel uneasy her entire life, but now that he was dead—finally quiet, finally still—it

made her even more nervous. She half-expected to walk by the door and find him gone, escaped into the snow along with Edith.

Eleanor started to walk away, then stopped, took a chair from the kitchen table, and wedged it firmly under the doorknob.

When they were children, even Eleanor's friends knew there was something off about Phillip. "“My dad said that Pastor Johnson says that Eleanor's brother is a *demon*,” said Laura Smythe. “That's why her family isn't allowed to come to church.”

It was summer, a season that always felt blurred in Eleanor's memory, liquid and indistinct against the sharp relief of the upstate winters, particularly the summer her mother died. Eleanor remembered her friends from the third-grade class collapsing in the cool shade of the Doctorow porch, and something about the church social, and thin mean Laura Smythe delivering her pronouncement – *demon* – with a hiss, like the voice of a monster in the scary drive-in movies. Edith went to see those movies with boys, then recreated them for Eleanor in the dark of their room after lights out. Sometimes Phillip would shuffle to the door and watch, and clap with delight at Edith's scary voices.

After her friends left, Eleanor sat on the porch by herself and played with her headless doll. The sun fell away from the sky. When she heard the first cricket she realized how quiet it was in the house, how quiet it had been for hours. Nothing from Phillip, not even the soft noises of her mother cleaning or cooking. Eleanor looked up at the house; a chill she couldn't explain siphoned down her spine and pooled in her gut. She clenched her grimy fist more tightly around her doll and went inside.

She found them in her mother's room. Her mother was slumped over at her vanity table, a pen still under her fingers and a letter half-composed trapped under her head and the

thick brown wall of her upswept hair. Phillip hovered back and forth over her, his face contorted in a wet, silent sob. He kept reaching out his long-nailed hands to touch her, but drew back just before he did, as if afraid that the actual touch would make real what his eyes merely invented. He hovered, back and forth, reached and drew back. Their mother didn't move. Through the window, the sun, a dim dark orange, sank into the trees. As it dropped, so did the doll, from her hands, landing on the wooden floor with a dull thunk.

It was hot and hazy the day of their mother's funeral. Eleanor felt sweat form and trickle and run all along her body under her stiff black clothes. Despite that, she felt cold, rough and inert as a dark bar of iron. The casket was closed, lowered into the ground. Eleanor cried, and when she cried herself out she tried to imagine her house without her mother, like a summer day with the sun, like a cold night in winter without a snow-bright moon.

After the funeral, everyone slowly made their way back the cars. Everyone except for Phillip, who wandered off into the graves. Eleanor waited and watched, made sure that Edith and her father weren't paying attention, and slipped off after him.

She caught up with him in the far corner of the graveyard. He sat under a small oak tree, its boughs still green with youth. In his black suit, he looked more like a normal person than Eleanor had ever seen. When he noticed her standing there, he looked up and smiled huge and happy at her, as if sitting in the shade of a young oak tree was the only contentment he needed. It was the only time Eleanor wished she could be like Phillip, if only for a moment, so she could forget her mother slumped over her vanity, her lamp guttered out. And she knew it wasn't Phillip's fault—she overheard the doctor telling her father that “her heart was already very weak, it was only a matter of time”—but she couldn't

forget the way she found Phillip standing over her, couldn't shake the nagging suspicion that he had done something to her

“Are you a demon?” Eleanor asked.

Sun splashed through the oak leaves and dappled in wild patterns across Phillip's face. In the shadows, he tilted his head like an animal considering a noise or a signal, his face composed and serene. Then his mouth broke open in a horrible grin and he hissed out in Edith's scary movie monster voice: “Yes. Yesssssss!”

The fifth day of snow dawned. Edith had not come back. Eleanor had not eaten in twenty-four hours. She sat at the kitchen table and ran her cold, cold hands over the smooth grain of the wood. There was nothing left to burn but the house itself. The phones were still down; in her frustration, Eleanor knocked the phone over to the floor, breaking it, then spent a panicked few minutes putting it back together and reattaching its wires just in case. When she turned the knob of the kitchen sink and nothing came out, she cried a little. The pipes were frozen.

Eleanor sat down on the floor of the kitchen and made a list in her head. This was what she was good at. This was a problem, and all problems had solutions. It may take you hundreds of steps, hundreds of pages, hundreds of missteps and false starts, but any problem could be diagrammed, charted, slapped on a blackboard. Snowflakes were geometrical; snow, then, could be solved, proved. She should be able to figure this out. Add food. Add heat. Subtract the blizzard from both sides. Divide by Phillip. Multiply by Edith, by thaw.

She looked up. The chair in front of Phillip's door had moved. It *looked* like it had moved, like it was pushed out into the room. The door stood open an inch. She'd closed

the door and shoved the chair under the handle they day before. Hadn't she? "I'm hungry," she said out loud. She stood up and went to close the door, to put the chair back in place.

Eleanor looked at Phillip through the crack of the open door. She opened it a little; light from the kitchen fell in across his sheet, the angles of his body making mountains and valleys of the white. One of his socked feet protruded. Eleanor made a disgusted sound and stepped in, hastily tugged the sheet down over the feet.

"Edith's gone," she said. "We're out of food." The room smelled rotten, sickly sweet, a butcherhouse smell. It had smelled good yesterday. Like a leaf pile in autumn smells, like the air feels then, holding the last breath of summer in as long as possible until it cools and dies and the world wobbles into winter. "Maybe I should bury you in the snow. You're starting to smell." Eleanor stood up, then stopped. "No, can't do that. Dogs would get you." She looked up at the ceiling as if through it, up to the second story where their parents' old bedroom sat right over them. "Mother would hate that."

She turned to leave the room, but the light in the kitchen, the light outside – not real light, the false light of snow, the hidden sun's dim grey reflection off endless, endless white – seemed bleak and angry, eager to wash her out. And it felt warm in the room, warmer than all the rest of the house. It had always felt that way. This had been her room. Eleanor closed the door and sat on the floor next to the bed. "It's cold out there," she explained to Phillip.

The bedsprings creaked. Phillip shifted—his arm flopped over the edge of the bed and hung there.

He couldn't possibly be alive. Eleanor knew that much. He was dead. Edith felt his pulse with her thick fingers. They'd carried him across the house and left him there for three days. The room smelled of his decomposing body. "It's not possible," Eleanor said, sitting

back down on the floor. She never looked away from Phillip, watched him intently. She felt if she took her eyes off of him again, something terrible would happen, she would be allowing some life or movement that should not be allowed. “It’s not possible. It’s simple, in mathematics terms.” She drew on the floor with her finger as she talked, but she did not look away from Phillip. “You see, Phillip, I just have to disprove the idea that you are alive right now. For you to be alive, there are two propositions we can start with. One is that you were never dead, the corollary of which is that you are now still alive, as you have been this whole time.” As she talked, she felt herself slip into the atonal, loud voice she used when lecturing her female students. It comforted her. This was a lesson, a class like any other. She simply had to follow her notes and her knowledge and the student would see the logic, the beautiful inevitability of the math, at the end. “Proposition two is that you were definitely dead before, the corollary of which is that you are now back from the dead. Also quite farfetched.

“Of course—Edith took your pulse. You didn’t have one. You never moved, haven’t eaten or had water, in four days. So, the first proposition cannot be proved true, which means its corollary cannot be proved. Which leaves us only with the second proposition.” Eleanor swallowed. “And its corollary.”

She stopped talking. The sound of the blizzard was muted in the room but still present, a constant murmur just in the range of hearing. The room felt like a secret nest, a buffer of heat and stench and darkness against the world outside. Outside was cold, hunger, Edith’s footprints vanishing into the snow. Everything was going to be fine, in the room with Phillip. Everything was warm. “Everything’s warm,” she said aloud. In the dark, the old bedsprings shifted as if something was rolling toward her, changing its place in the world.

CHAPTER TWO: SLASH, BURN

I'm in love with Jennifer Feldman and I'm going to hell for it. That's what our youth group leader says. We sit in a circle on Sunday after church and the first thing Leader Todd said is "Homosexuals will be struck down by the divine fire!" He says it like our pastor, loud and brimstone. The rec room where we hold youth group is no church. Whitewashed cinder block walls, no windows, a lingering smell of broccoli. He looks silly standing there in his long-sleeved white button-up with no tie and making divine pronouncements. He's only a few years older than we are. "Divine fire!" he repeats, tossing up his hands. My best friend, Marie Claire, who looks like the cover models of the magazine she's named for, laughs under her breath.

Across the circle, Jennifer Feldman is luminous. Her long red hair is bright and fiery even in the pasty fluorescent light of the rec room. She looks down at her purple-painted fingernails; she slumps and hunches over. Everyone says she's a lesbian, and I'm dying to find out if it's true.

"Divine fire," Leader Todd rants, "is the Lord's holy and just punishment for the sin of homosexual love!" His face turns red and splotchy as he works himself up. His voice ratchets up and thins out, like cheesecloth stretched too far. Marie Claire laughs again when Leader Todd's voice cracks on "love!" Jennifer Feldman doesn't look up. I wonder if there's a special hell for lesbians, some place where sports bras don't exist and all the women look like King Henry VIII.

* * * *

I want to tell Marie Claire that I think I'm a lesbian—she's very sophisticated, very *modern*, and she thinks church is a joke—but someone is burning churches and we're in my tiny red-walled room watching the news report. The blonde newscaster is trying too hard to look professional in a conservative black pants suit that looks like funeral wear. She says that the police think it could be anyone. Teenagers, women, old men.

“I think it's aliens,” Marie Claire says, dabbing bright pink polish on her bitten nails.

I don't ever paint my nails, but I like watching Marie Claire do hers. There's something comforting and feminine about it. “Aliens wouldn't burn churches.” I feel an expert on this matter. I've watched lots of *X-Files* re-runs, on the nights my mother doesn't come home until late. “They mutilate cows and kidnap children, but they don't run around Alabama burning Baptist churches.”

Marie Claire clicks her tongue, but doesn't turn away from the television. They show footage of the latest burning; an ugly white building that has burned almost completely away, leaving a black broken scar on the side of Highway 64. “That's stupid, Margaret,” Marie Claire says. “I think aliens would burn churches *way* before they would cut up a bunch of stupid cows.”

I shrug and go back to the book in my lap. It's a historical romance about two English women who volunteer as firefighters during the Blitz and fall in love with each other while their husbands are at war. At the height of the action, they fall into each other's arms and make love in an alley among flaming rubble. This is the part I read over and over. Sometimes I picture myself and Jennifer Feldman playing the parts of the women.

The news covers the church burning for the entire half-hour. Policemen give long interviews that replayed every few minutes. Marie Claire watches intently. I look up every

now and then. The pictures of the church's ruined hulk fascinate me. Like firebombed London probably looked, smoking into the plane-filled night.

"It's probably just a bunch of stupid kids from school," I said.

Marie Claire snorted. "No way. That's too simple. It's got to be more interesting than that."

"The simplest explanation tends to be the right one," I quote, without looking up from my book. "Why do you care, anyway? You hate church as much as I do."

Marie Claire scoffs. "That doesn't mean it's okay to burn *buildings* down. You're awful, Margaret.

I ignore her. Her attention is elsewhere. It's not a good time.

I never thought I was a lesbian until Jennifer Feldman came back from summer vacation last year. She'd dyed her hair red and traded in ill-fitting jean skirts for dark, baggy pants studded with useless buckles, her animal print T-shirts for T-shirts with skulls, words written in blood, and the names of bands I never heard of. The rumors followed close and dark behind. She's pretty, freckled, slightly overweight, wears too much dark eye makeup, and never styles her hair. She's a far cry from me and my friends like Marie Claire, the glamorous youth group girls who go to expensive faith conferences and dye our hair blonde together each month. I don't understand what about Jennifer Feldman makes everyone think she's a lesbian other than the fact that she doesn't seem interested in boys. But she doesn't seem interested in anyone. She barely talks to anyone.

I'm not interested in boys, either. I don't really want to do anything with them. I've gone on dates; they're awful, awkward. Kissing a boy is like kissing a wall or your pillow. Scott Miller asked me out a few weeks ago. I only went because Marie Claire found out and

bullied me into saying yes. He treated me well; the movie sucked, but he was nice. He tried to hold my hand during the movie and I let him. Two hours of his cold, sweaty palm on mine in the dark. He took me home right after; we sat in his old red Blazer in the driveway of my house and he kissed me. It wasn't that it was bad. It just wasn't anything at all.

One cloudy Saturday, I went to a big, church-sponsored garage sale with Marie Claire, in the next town over from ours. While she and some of our other friends pawed through racks of secondhand clothes—*Seventeen* says you can find great bargains and vintage treasures at garage sales—I rifled through the boxes and boxes of battered paperbacks and jacketless hardcover novels that people had donated. I love anything that seems slightly trashy, sensationalist, or bad for you. No literature; nothing I might read in school. I hunted for vampire stories and terrible romance novels. I stopped when I picked up a yellowed, bent paperback with the familiar romance novel cover—swoopy script, a picture of a woman with a barely-contained, obviously heaving bosom—and realized that there were two *women* pictured on the cover, embracing each other. The title was *Far Away from Love*. Intrigued and a little disturbed, I put it in my bag without paying for it. I wanted to read it but I didn't want the woman running the cash table or my friends to see it.

I read it three times that week, front to back, barely resting between the end of one read and the next. It was the same as any romance novel I'd read—melodramatic, full of double-crosses and tearful reunions—but with two *women*. Two women kissing, making love, peeling each other out of their blouses and bras and sliding their hands into each others' underwear, all in the most graphic romance-novel detail. At first I thought I was just curious. I knew on an intellectual level what gays and lesbians were, but I'd never seen a real-life example or thought that hard about what the concept entailed. But as I read the book over and over, the lines branding deeper and hotter into my memory each time, I

realized I was more than curious; I was turned on. The *Cosmopolitan* quizzes, another shared ritual with Marie Claire and our circle, had always been very clear about arousal—how to get there, what it feels like. What to do about it when you achieve it, either by yourself or with a partner. And while doing that stuff with a boy, or feeling that way about one, had always seemed distant and alien to me, it was very different alone in my room, alone in the house, *Far Away from Love* pulled open to the first shivering, stop-start time that Mary and Josephine make love in the bed that Mary usually shares with her husband, away at war. I imagined myself as Mary, the more timid one. When Josephine’s hand touch Mary’s breast, I touched my own. When Josephine’s fingers slid into Mary’s lap, and further, so did mine. *Cosmo* tells you what an orgasm feels like, how to achieve one by “self-stimulation,” but the reality was very different. Afterwards, I lay back on the couch, half-naked and wracked by aftershocks, sweating more than a little and feeling completely electrified. Everything seemed sharper, more highly defined and contrasted, as if I’d put on a new pair of glasses without ever realizing I was near sighted.

My alone time with Mary and Josephine became a ritual. When junior year started and Jennifer Feldman appeared, transformed and surrounded by that particular word—*lesbian*—that I’d been silently turning over and over in my mind like a well-gnawed but strangely shaped chicken bone, it wasn’t long until Josephine’s hand on me became Jennifer’s, her red hair falling around us like a curtain, hiding us both away.

The next Sunday, Leader Todd stands in the middle of our youth group circle and talks about the church burnings. Jennifer Feldman is, strangely, not there. As I sit in the circle next to Marie Claire, I feel a weird ache in my chest, swelling under my rib and slowly

sinking down into me. It takes me a minute to realize I'm disappointed. It takes me another minute to realize that figuring this out makes me blush.

"Why would someone do this?" Leader Todd asks. He speaks whitely; his teeth dominate every word he let out. "This was a house of God. The *third* house of God, the third Baptist bastion of belief in the tri-county area, to be burned to the *ground* by unbelievers."

"How do we know it was unbelievers?" This was Jarrod Hessmeyer, a black-haired freshman who was new to the area and liked to interrupt Leader Todd. He annoyed the others, but I thought the things he said were funny.

"Of course they were unbelievers, idiot," Marie Claire said, next to me. Her golden crucifix necklace swung back and forth over her breasts as she spoke. "Believers would never harm a church." She likes to argue, make it look like she cares when really she doesn't. I wish I could be that convincing. Leader Todd is always asking me to speak out more.

"Maybe they would," Jarrod Hessmeyer shoots back. "Maybe they thought it was what God wanted them to do." I sense that when Jarrod talks about God, he's only being half-serious. Kind of like Marie Claire. Kind of like a lot of my friends. I feel odd saying things about God, sometimes, but my solution is to say nothing at all, rather than sound insincere.

"Be careful, Jarrod," Leader Todd says. "It sounds like you're defending these people. You wouldn't want people to think *you* were one of the church burners." Everyone laughs and Leader Todd smiles big and white, but Jarrod didn't look amused.

One of the younger girls, Carrie, raises a hand and speaks quietly in the direction of no one. "I hate whoever's doing this. I hope they get caught and sent to jail."

“I’d like to beat them up.” This from one of our school’s football players. His words rouse a chorus of approval from the other boys in the room.

I’m puzzled by the anger of my friends. I think burning churches is a horrible thing to do, but I’m not mad about it. I don’t want the people who’ve done it to die or anything. They haven’t killed anyone. But I don’t say this out loud. I think I would be mad if someone burned down *our* church, but no one has. They probably can’t, either. It’s huge and new and expensive, brick and stone and leaded glass. I can see someone setting fire to our church and the building sitting sedately immune, bathed in flames, and untouchable.

“Margaret.” The sound of my name, escaping bell-like from Leader Todd’s mouth, startles me. I turn to face him, and he smiles. “What are your thoughts on this?”

Sometimes Leader Todd does this, calls on me out of nowhere because I don’t speak out on my own. He says he does this so that all voices, even quiet ones, can be heard, but the look on his face when he forces me to speak makes me nervous and fluttery, in a bad way, like I’m being teased but don’t understand how or why.

I clear my throat and say simply, “It’s wrong.” This seems like a safe answer to me.

Leader Todd nods. “Anything to add to that?”

The bell rings, signaling the end of youth group and a lunch break until afternoon service. Leader Todd continues to look at me for a moment, as if expecting me to answer the question anyway. But then Jarrod Hessmeyer gets up and walks out, and everyone else follows suit. Leader Todd holds up his hand: long fingers, big knuckles. “Wait a second. Where’s Jennifer?”

I wondered that, too. Jennifer Feldman doesn’t act like Leader Todd’s definition of a “good Christian” most of the time. She doesn’t talk during youth group and gives surly, angry answers when called on. Despite that, she always comes to church and youth group.

Her parents are well-respected members of the congregation (and, according to Marie Claire, very wealthy contributors).

“Her mother’s not here today, either,” says Carrie.

Leader Todd frowns, then nods. “All right. I’ll see you all at afternoon service.” It’s a command, not a request.

Jennifer Feldman doesn’t come to school on Monday. I, for one, notice all the places she usually is like negative space, sort of empty and folded in. She’s not sitting on the front steps of the school with her few friends in the morning before first bell, not passing me in the hall on the way to second period, not sitting two seats in front of me in geometry. At first, no one else comments on her absence; as far as Marie Claire and our friends are concerned, Jennifer is a non-entity. However, before the end of the day, one particular rumor takes hold and spreads throughout the student body like kudzu or wildfire. The word is that Jennifer got pregnant, and her mother took her on Sunday morning, under the pretense of illness, to an abortion clinic.

This is how people talked about it. Not in the active sense, ascribing a choice to Jennifer. Not “Jennifer Feldman had an abortion.” Always “Her mother *took her* to an abortion clinic.” As if it’s all Mrs. Feldman’s fault.

No one seems to be sure exactly how the rumor started, or if it’s even true. Marie Claire says someone saw them going into the clinic, in the next county over, right up by the Florida state line. And that was that. The news buzzes through the informed upper echelons of our school—the seniors, the athletes, the popular youth group girls—and by Friday trickles out to freshmen and teachers.

I don't believe it. Jennifer Feldman doesn't date; she doesn't even to anyone. You have to have sex to get pregnant, and as far as anyone knows Jennifer Feldman hasn't so much as flirted with any guy, at least at school.

That disappointment I felt at youth group on Sunday rises back up into my chest. It feels a little bigger, now, a little more squashed into every corner of my rib cage. If Jennifer Feldman *is* pregnant, then she's definitely not a lesbian. Which makes me feel a little silly, a little panicked. My fantasy of passionate lesbian sex in ruined alleys suddenly seems stupid. Foolish, as Leader Todd says. Foolish thoughts, foolish choices.

"What's wrong with you?" Marie Claire narrows her eyes at me over the lunch table. She sipped on a tiny juice box that looked comical in her thin, pink-nailed hands.

I shake my head. "Nothing. I'm fine."

My father died of a heart attack when I was seven. My mother, a respected director and advisor of hospital nursing departments across New England, decided to move us from New Hampshire to Alabama, where she'd gotten a job offer as a regional nursing director. It required a lot of travel on her part, and we had to live in the middle of her most frequented locations, which put us in the state's rural stretches of highway and dairy. But the money was better than anything she'd ever earned in the north and she was looking for a reason to leave. She never said it, but I knew the thing she wanted most in those months after my father died was to get away from anything and everything that reminded her of him.

We were devoutly Pentecostal. However, a few weeks before we were scheduled to move to Alabama, we skipped church. Instead, my mother drove us a few towns away to an unlabelled doctor's office I didn't recognize. I waited in a green room strewn with women's health magazines while my mother disappeared into the back of the building. Half an hour

later, she emerged, pale and wobbly. We went next door to a diner and ate lunch before she seemed well enough to drive.

It wasn't until we moved to Alabama that I realized my mother had gone to have an abortion. She hadn't even told me she was pregnant. Suddenly, the pamphlets on pregnancy, grief counseling, and STD prevention I'd seen in that "doctor's" office made sense. The broken, limping way my mother moved those first few weeks in Alabama took on a terrible significance. I didn't put it together until the youth leader in our new church, Leader Todd, gave us a frightening talk on abortion and why it was a terrible sin. It was a Baptist church, different from what we'd had in New Hampshire. There were no Pentecostal churches nearby, and my mother refused to let me get out of the habit of church attendance. So I went. My mother, however, went less and less, until finally she stopped going at all. I fell in with the platinum-blond, eyeshadowed, cheerleader church girls out of loneliness. I rode to church every Sunday with Marie Claire until I got my driver's license and my first car, a used white Chevy Blazer, the summer before junior year.

I can't fault my mother. She couldn't, and still can't, stand anything that reminds her of my father. To have his child without him would have been unbearable. At the same time, I don't tell anyone about it. Leader Todd was very clear from the beginning about the Lord's condemnation of abortion, and all my friends believe it fiercely. Even Marie Claire, who is about as religious as Britney Spears, talks shit about the pro-choice liberals interviewed on the news shows she's addicted to. Pentecostal church was grim and solemn, and its God could be demanding and powerful. Baptist church, for all its shiny new buildings and sunny Sunday routine, scares me more because everyone is a judge, everyone is a little God in their own way. I believe in God, I think, but I don't know that I believe in people.

I never talk about my mother. She's always gone on her consulting visits and sleeps during the brief time she spends at home, so I never see her. Except for leaving food money on the kitchen counter, she's barely present in my life at all. I go to church with friends. But I've never told anyone, not even Marie Claire, about the abortion. I don't even think about it, usually, but I think about it now. I imagine Jennifer Feldman, pinched and white at the door to the abortion clinic, and remember my mother, years ago, walking shakily out to our green pickup truck, resting her head for a moment against the door.

I know some things are wrong. Lesbian sex. Abortion. Abortion is wrong. I know that. I can't imagine getting one. I can't imagine killing a baby. But I think of Jennifer, and my mother, and instead of being angry I feel sad. I imagine Jennifer sitting at home with a look on her face like someone has pulled her cork and let all the wine seep slowly out of her.

On Tuesday, my homeroom teacher, Mr. Michaels, asks me to stay after the bell.

"Margaret." He takes off his glasses. He does that when he has to impart something grave, like the expulsion of a classmate or the burning of another church. "I—we, I mean, the teachers—have a favor to ask you."

I don't like the sound of that. In my experience, adults don't like being indebted to those they see as children. "What?"

Mr. Michaels sighs. "Jennifer Feldman is being homeschooled for a few weeks until—well. She's being homeschooled." He picks up a hefty stack of folders. "Her teachers are compiling her daily work to be sent home. You live near her, don't you?"

It depends on what he means by "near." Everyone in my area lives in tiny houses off the main highway, a cluster of two or three homes down a dirt road pushing deep into wood and pasture. Jennifer Feldman lives on the same dirt road as me, but mine is the first

house off the highway. Hers is the last, a mile or more back, where the trees grow thick and close.

“I guess,” I say noncommittally. I know where this is going. Panic, dull as a distant bell, tolls deep in my chest.

“Excellent.” He hefts the stack of folders and hands them to me. “If you could pick up these things from me every day in homeroom and take them to Jennifer when you go home from school, that would be great. Her parents work. They can’t come pick up her assignments.” He smiles pleasantly at me, soft hands folded.

I want to say no. Before this week, the thought of taking Jennifer Feldman her work, having an excuse to see her, spend time with her, talk to her, would have excited me. Now it makes me nervous. All the things I’ve been thinking about her, about me, are probably wrong, and I push them down but they’re still there, lurking under the surface like sharks ready to snap at any drop of blood.

Ultimately, I can’t think of a good reason to say no. “Okay,” I say quietly. I take the folders from Mr. Michaels.

“Thank you, Margaret,” he says as I walk out. “You’re doing us all a favor.”

Yes, I thought. I’m doing everyone a favor, because no one else wants to talk to the abortion girl. I’m doing a favor to everyone except myself.

Jennifer Feldman’s house, despite being tucked away in the woods almost two miles off the main highway, is massive. Jennifer’s mother, Helen, answers the door. “Hello, Margaret,” she says, and gives me an unenthusiastic smile. “Come in.” I remember the way Jennifer’s story spread from person to person—“her *mother* took her”—and I wonder if adults turn on each other the way kids do, when faith and violation are involved.

“Jennifer’s in the den watching television,” Mrs. Feldman says. She points in a vague direction towards the back of the house and then vanishes into the kitchen. She doesn’t want to talk. She’s afraid of getting from me what she’s getting from most people, I think; the forced politeness smoothed over anger and resentment, Christian charity masking Christian indignation.

The den is a huge space set lower than the rest of the house. I have to step down into it. Jennifer lays on her stomach watching television. She wears a plain white shirt and a pair of men’s boxers, red plaid. I never noticed before how thick and white her thighs were. She never wears shorts to school. She looks drained, hollowed out; if I open her up I might see nothing but the scraped leathery insides of a gourd. A Bible verse comes to me, an image. Something about a fruit without seed. That’s how Jennifer looks. A fruit without seed. A cored apple.

She looks up at me, then looks away as if she’d expected someone else. “You can leave that stuff on the table. Thanks.” Her usual dark makeup is nowhere in sight; instead, pale skin and a splash of freckles. Her long red hair hangs lank and dark over her shoulders. It looks like she hasn’t washed it.

“Okay,” I say. I put the folders down on a glass end table. I wait for a moment, wondering if I should say something or ask her how she is, but her attention is focused so powerfully away from me that I decide to just turn and go. The thing I’d been afraid of, a surge of bad thoughts about her and her hair, never surfaces. This way, she seems less like the vibrant, aloof animal I knew from school and more defeated, strange and imprisoned, shut away from the sun.

Then I hear someone on the television say “Fire.” I walk over behind Jennifer. “What’s happening?” I ask, but as soon as I see the screen, it’s obvious. Another church has

been burned. This one in broad daylight while the pastor and church secretary were out to lunch. Before, the morning news had only caught the burned ruins of the churches. They'd been set on fire during the night. Now, the camera crews show the fire in all its glory, a roaring, billowing monster pouring black smoke thick into the sky. I sit down next to Jennifer and watch. We sit there in quiet and watch together as the church burns down like a lit candle, wood and paint falling away from it like so much melted wax.

When it's over and the regular five o'clock news comes on, I stay where I am. Jennifer rolls onto her side and looks at me. "They're four for four." Her voice sounds flat, toneless, and she looks at me like she expects me to say something: Some passionate exclamation against the church burners, or a snide comment about her own situation.

I stand up. "Yeah." Then, "I have to go." I turn and walk out, pulling myself to the door and out of the house by sheer force of will, ignoring the dark feeling in my gut spreading warm and slow like molasses or blood through my hips and thighs, sparked by her bare legs, her eyes, her nearness.

As I open the front door, I hear from the back of the house: "See you tomorrow."

My mother used to work days at a hospital, so I saw her a lot more. This was before the abortion, before my father died, back in New Hampshire. I was pretty young, then, so I don't remember very much, but one thing that stands out is her songs. She didn't know many songs other than ones by Judy Collins and she doesn't have a good voice. But she hated telling stories or reading aloud to me at bedtime—reading was something I discovered later, for myself—so when it was time for bed she would sit in my room in the dark and make up songs.

They usually had mismatched lyrics cobbled together from Bible stories and children's rhymes. My favorite out of all of them was one she sang to the tune of Johnny Cash's "I Walk the Line." The only lyrics I really remember are "You reap what you sow, you reap what you sow." She sang that part over and over, "you reap what you sow." It doesn't sound like a very comforting child's song, but I loved it. The Biblical context of "you reap what you sow" always sounds threatening in a preacher's mouth, a warning of consequence. Coming from my mother, with a stolen melody, it sounded like a promise, a small guarantee that good hard work would eventually be rewarded.

Taking Jennifer Feldman her assignments seems like this to other people, especially my friends. "You are such a saint," Marie Claire says at lunch. She paints her fingernails instead of eating. "I wouldn't have done it in a million years. You know Pastor Johnson and the council are talking about asking them to leave the church, if it's true."

I don't feel this way. When I take Jennifer's thick folder of missed schoolwork to her house the second day, it feels like an adventure more than a chore; a trek through the trees, and there at the end, the princess, held prisoner. I knock on the front door once, but before I can knock again, Jennifer pulls the door open, as if she'd been waiting for me. "Hi." She smiles—her top lip is thin but her bottom is full and red, even without lipstick. "How are you?"

We've never been friends, but she sounds light and happy, almost like she's glad to see me. I feel hot all through my chest, even though it's cool outside on her porch. I hand her the folder. "I'm fine. How do you feel?"

"Oh, you know. Being sick is a drag." She doesn't look sick. Apart from being pale she seems restless, energized. If I hadn't heard the gossip at school, I might not have noticed anything wrong with Jennifer at all. "Come on in," she says, and smiles again. The

afternoon light tangles brightly in her red hair. The way she looks at me, like a dog greeting a returning master, pours something warm and electric right down through me. I step inside and let her close and lock the door behind us.

The next day, I knock at Jennifer's door and receive no answer. Puzzled, I knock again. Her mother is always home, always quick to answer. A third knock pushes the door inward. It's unlocked, standing slightly open.

I heft the folders and step inside. Someone is home. I hear someone talking in the back of the house. I switch the folders from one arm to the other and make my way back to the den.

Jennifer is there, with her back slightly to me. She doesn't see me come in. She is on the phone, and she's crying. Her face is wet and sticky and red with her eyes squinted together and liquid.

"This isn't fair," she says. "I'm the one paying the consequences here." Quiet a moment, then: "They know I wasn't alone!" She chokes that last sentence out, then hangs up the phone and tosses it down hard on the couch. It slides off and lands on the floor. She curses and bends down to pick it up, and as she stands she sees me.

We stand there, facing each other. She snuffles and wipes her nose with a sleeve. I look past her, suddenly panicked and wishing her mother would materialize.

I step down into the den and lay the folders on the glass end table. "There's your work from today."

Jennifer nods, waves a hand filled with crumpled tissues at me. "Thank you," she says thickly, her voice rough with sobs and snot.

I want to go, but she seems so upset, so crumpled in and unhappy, that the thought of turning around and leaving her like this, apparently alone, makes me feel guilty and unChristian. I think lots of unChristian things, but I've never acted on them. I take a deep breath and make myself walk to the couch and sit down next to her. Even with her face a mess from crying, she looks strange and beautiful.

"Are you okay?" This is the only thing I can think to say.

She shrugs. "Not really." She wipes a tissue across her mouth. "Things are just really messed up right now. I can't really talk about it." She sniffles again, but less violently, and her face seems less folded, opening back into calm. "Thanks."

I fold my hands in my lap. The television is turned off. Without it, the house seems too quiet. It occurs to me that I'm not very good at comforting people. I've never really had to do it before—my friends are all like Marie Claire, popular and unflappable and not prone to hysterics—and I have no idea how to end the conversation.

Jennifer doesn't answer, so I stand up. "Well. If there's anything I can do—you know." I smile.

"Yeah," she answers. She stays where she is on the couch. Even as I walk out the front door and close it, I felt as if she doesn't move a muscle until I'm ten feet away from the door.

That night, I'm re-reading the middle section of *Far Away from Love*—the part where Mary tries to break off her relationship with Josephine out of guilt and fear—when around midnight, something taps on my window.

It's Jennifer. I push up the glass and speak to her through the screen. "What are you doing? How did you know this was my room?"

“Only light on,” she says. “And everyone knows your mom’s gone all the time. Her car’s not here.” It’s cold outside; she hugs herself, draped in a thick black-knit sweater. We stand on opposite sides of the screen, quiet. Then she says, “Hey. Do you want to go for a drive?”

I blink. “A drive? Where?”

“Just around.” Jennifer stands up. The red wetness of her earlier crying is completely gone, as if pushed off her face. “I’ve been cooped up in my house for a week. I just need to get out for a little bit, and I don’t want to be by myself. I’ll give you gas money.”

“You want me to drive?”

“Please? I don’t have a car.”

I grope instinctively for an excuse, as if I’ve been asked out on a date and don’t have a prepared denial to hand. Then I realize I want to go. I feel a weird thrill, as if I *have* been asked out on a date. But it’s only a drive.

“Sure.” I say. “Let’s go.”

I don’t know Alabama well—I think you have to grow up here to have an intimate understanding of its woods and ponds and lace network of dirt roads. I have no idea where we go, where Jennifer directs me from the passenger seat, but it seems like we cover miles, like we drive breathlessly from one end of the state to the other and back, racing the moon’s slow trek across the sky. We stop at a McDonald’s in a town I don’t recognize and get burgers, fries, milkshakes. We listen to the radio. Jennifer switches it to a station full of loud angry guitar music and screaming male singers, the kind of music I’ve always pictured Jennifer in her black clothes and eye makeup listened to. Tonight, she’s not wearing either. I look over at her from time to time. Her pale skin beams and darkens with the periodic

swell of oncoming headlights. In the dark she's only a suggestion of shape and color, lit up in blue by the dashboard, but her smell is strong and vivid, cigarette smoke and something like incense, woodchips, a fruit/flower shampoo. We talk only a little; mostly, we just drive.

Around two o'clock in the morning, she tells me to pull up into an unfenced field. I park and turn the headlights off. Down across the field and over a thin line of trees stands a small white church, and past that, the black strip of the next highway over, barbed with intermittent streetlights. It's autumn cold and bright with moon.

Jennifer gets out. She leaves the radio on and the doors open, then pulls a cigarette and a lighter out of her purse. I get out and sit next to her. She offers me a cigarette, which I surprise myself by taking, although I've never smoked before in my life. She must sense that, because she lights it for me, the lighter flickering in a brief gust of cool breeze.

We smoke our cigarettes, just sitting there. Everything seems dark and still, as if we've stepped out of life for a moment just to get our breath back. I look at Jennifer, and even though she seemed content and carefree during our drive, now she looks sad, her eyes large in the moonlight, sucking down a breath of smoke and letting it go as if reluctantly, wisps of it passing cold into the air. In that moment she looks so fragile, something to be protected, that all the pent-up lust I have for her deepens and turns like wine, and the only thing I want is to make her feel okay, to give her something that lets her know that she's not alone in this, that she has *me*. This could be my one moment to break through and show her that she can trust me, love me. That of all the judgmental people who are turning against her, I know what she's going through, and I understand. I tap ash off my cigarette—inexpertly, almost dropping it—and say, “You know, my mother had an abortion.”

Jennifer looks at me, her eyes wide. She coughs.

I wait for her to stop coughing, then continue. “No one knows that, so please don’t tell anyone. It’s just – you know, things happen. My dad died, and then she found out she was pregnant. And she was alone, you know? And she was sad. I was really young, still. So she got rid of it.” I run my hands down the side of my pants. My palms feel slick and cold, like Scott Miller’s hand felt holding mine through all two hours of my first and only date. “And I know it’s wrong. In God’s eyes there’s no good reason for it. I guess what I’m saying is that, even though it’s wrong, people do it. And it’s not, like, the worst thing in the universe. There are worse things, you know?” Saying this buoys me up; I feel a glow ignite somewhere inside me, and whether its because I’ve told a stranger an unspoken secret or I feel like I’ve told Jennifer something that will make her less sad doesn’t matter. Weightless and incandescent. If I look down I won’t be surprised to see that I’m lit from inside like one of those transparent fish you read about in *National Geographic*.

“I didn’t have an abortion. Is that what you think?”

A wind blows up, too chilly for my thin jacket. Embarrassment bubbles up dark and thick in my gut, and I want very much to erase her question, to rewind and let that beautiful, white silence just go on and on until it’s time to go home. “No. I just heard—”

Jennifer laughs. “Margaret, I’m under house arrest.” She fishes for another cigarette. “And no one knows *that*, either, so please don’t tell anyone.”

The embarrassment I feel suddenly stops dead and drops through me with a leaden thump, hollow. “You shouldn’t have left,” I say stupidly. Her desperation to get out of the house takes on a vivid new urgency, her aimless direction of my driving, her carefree attitude erasing the crying fit I’d seen the end of.

“Who cares?” She offers me another cigarette, which I decline. “My parents aren’t home. I don’t have an ankle bracelet or anything. My parole officer checked on me this morning. I’m golden until tomorrow.”

I can’t think of what to do. I wonder if one can get in trouble for being in the company of someone violating a house arrest. Conspiracy to commit escape from house arrest. Aiding and abetting house arrest. I’ve never been in trouble for anything, so this seems like a prime first opportunity for karma to hit with a vengeance. I want to leave, but I can’t think of a way to say so without seeming rude or ungrateful—for the company, the food, the cigarettes, the confidence—so instead I ask “What’d you do?”

Jennifer ignores me. She sits back on the hood of my car and looks out into the distance. She doesn’t speak. It takes me a minute to realize that she’s looking *at* something.

The moon is so bright that the field and the trees are well-lit. The church is a dark shape just beyond, and the lights of the highway beyond that. I don’t see anything peculiar, until in the distance something dark ambles out of the woods by the church and stops. I don’t realize, until Jennifer mutters “right on time” under her breath, that it’s a truck without its headlights on.

It’s hard to tell from this distance, but it looks like three people get out of the truck. They’re nothing more than moving blobs of light dark against dark and moonlight, but they look like men. I watch as they move across the field and disappear, somehow, into the tiny church.

Jennifer doesn’t look at me. Before, in the moonlight, she had looked alien and pretty, even more so than usual. Now the white light makes her seem harsh and cold. “My mother never had an abortion,” she says, “but I did have a brother. He died. He was, I don’t know, four months? Five? This was back in middle school.”

I try to think. Jennifer and I had gone to the same middle school, too, but we'd never been friends. I try to remember a day, any day where I stopped clinging to Marie Claire and saw Jennifer Feldman crying out of the corner of my eye.

"Do you ever get tired of it?" she asks. "Tired of the same old, same old?" She looks at the church as she says this. "There's this thing they do, in South America, called slash-and-burn. When the fields get drained of all their nutrients, energy, whatever, they go to a place that hasn't been used for farming and burn down all the trees. Something like that. My dad's company does it on land they buy down there. Someone's suing them because of it. Some tribe. We'd better go," she says all of a sudden. Without waiting for me, she gets back in the car. I turn to look at the dark church again, waiting for I don't know what, some flash of movement or noise to let me know that it isn't true, that it isn't what it looks like.

Jennifer says my name shortly. I take one last long look at the church. It's hard to make out, but a tiny red spark spills out against the blackness.

I don't speak the entire drive back home. We pull up in front of my house an hour later, and I get out and shut the door without saying a word.

Three weeks later they catch the arsonists. Two of them are older boys, eighteen and nineteen, high school dropouts. The third is a boy from our school named David Myers. I know him only because he'd been the center of gossip a few years ago when he dated none other than Jennifer Feldman for the quickest twenty-seven days in history. The boys are charged with five counts of arson. It remains to be seen whether David will be tried as a juvenile or as an adult. News reporters say that the police caught them due to an anonymous informant.

Jennifer had long since come back to school when the boys are caught. The two church burnings that happened while she was staying home knocked her effectively out of everyone's gossip circle. I see her here and there, and try to catch her eye, but when she doesn't acknowledge me I quickly look away and pretend I don't notice her either. Lately, when I re-read my lesbian firefighters novel, I picture a pretty, compact senior cheerleader named Marla in Jennifer's former role.

Sometimes I burn to confide in someone, to tell them where we went and what I saw that night, what Jennifer said. Everyone's still so convinced of the abortion story that no one suspects the truth. But when I think about telling someone, I think of sitting on Jennifer's couch and telling her the story about my mother. One word of that repeated to anyone and my mother—really, I—will be the target of all the whispering and nasty remarks that Jennifer had, I thought, stayed away from school to avoid. Marie Claire and her circle will drop me quickly, afraid of contamination, as if abortion might be a disease passed down from mother to daughter and transmitted to others by touch, by sharing air.

So a secret stays between us. We never speak after that, but sometimes, when we are older, seniors and moving with lightspeed grace through our final year of high school, I see her across a hallway, or the cafeteria, or behind the bleachers at a football game eating a hot dog and smoking. And every Sunday we sit across from each other in Leader Todd's prayer circle while he rants and rails at us. We don't talk; we barely glance across the circle. But the glance snaps taut as wire between us, strung at both ends by things we've never said to anyone but each other.

CHAPTER THREE: SOME BIRDS ROOST ON ROTTEN BRANCHES

My grandfather Gruffydd was the only one who listened to me talk about the bird. He didn't ignore me, like my parents, or try to convince me that the bird was something else, like the therapist with lime-white hands. Grandfather Gruffydd lived in a tiny brown house by the Prestatyn shore. I visited him frequently before he died. The shore was one of the only places where the bird was quiet. The first time I told him about the bird, I was twelve. We were having tea by his large bay window and looking out at the water. Winter tourists trailed along the edge of the freezing tide, wrapped in coats and scarves. A yellow stray dog ran back and forth on the strand. The teacup burned my hands. I told my grandfather about the bird. I don't remember exactly how I put it. Something like—

—When I have to be around a lot of strangers, or go somewhere new, everyone can see right into me, like I'm a cage. It's like they see everything about me deep down to my insides where there's a bird, and when everyone sees the bird, it starts trying to get out. It starts crashing around in the cage. Sometimes I feel like he's going to fly right out of my mouth—

Something like that. My grandfather withdrew behind his lined face, clean-shaven and pale, not the face of a man who lived by the sea. He owned an antique shop in the village.

A few minutes passed in silence, and then he reached for his tea. "Rhys. My boy. There's a legend, an old tale—a Welsh tale, mind you, not some English twaddle. My own grandmother used to tell it to me when I was little. She said that sometimes the people who

live under the sea—the *anmwyn*—use us to hold bad things inside, things that would do harm.”

“Like evil spirits?”

“Just so. She said the *anmwyn* do this because they themselves are too fragile and strange to contain badness. But humans—humans are strong. We are people of stone and earth. So the *anmwyn* send their evils to us, to hold inside us, to keep separate from the world so that the evils can do no harm.” He smiled. “Of course, sometimes they make *us* do bad things, like steal, or hurt people, or even just be afraid for no reason.”

Grandfather Gruffydd looked out the window. “We must never let go of it. You were born to hold this inside you. Don’t ever let it out. Don’t ever let someone open you and take it.” It was a bright, cloudless day, but something—not darkness, more like a deeper light—passed over his face.

He died a few days later. My sister and I stood on the street outside his cottage and watched the undertakers bring him out, covered in a white sheet, and load him into a van with the funeral home’s logo stenciled across the side, a man’s silhouette that looked like the old intro to *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. Mother and Father were inside the house, going through papers, packing cups and knick-knacks into boxes. The van drove away, up the slope and out of town, headed towards the funeral home in the next town. A seagull, tiny and underfed, ragged as a snarl of kelp, bleated at us from the chimney.

A few years later, a strange man came to our family’s house to take our picture. “Not a portrait,” Mother said, laughing. She touched the strange man’s arm. He was young and dark and his arm looked like a thin bone wrapped in cotton next to Mother’s thick wrist. “Toan here does candid portraits. It’s all the rage, Gruffydd,” she said to my father—

Gruffydd, Jr.—who drank coffee at the dinner table and pretended that the stranger wasn't there. I was fourteen and shy and always careful not to wake up the bird, so I hid behind my younger sister, Eira, while Mother introduced her.

“And our son, Rhys,” my mother called loudly. The sound of my name planted my feet and made me push a hand out to the dark, handsome boy with the camera. “Ioan,” he said, lightly shaking my hand. His teeth were very white and small. One of his parents must have been Indian, but his accent was all south Wales. I wondered how I must look to him; pale and scrawny, my eyes like a frightened animal, huge and dark.

“As I was saying, Gruffydd.” Mother spoke as if addressing Father, but she was talking to us all. Her voice and her perfume filled our tiny mountain-side house and made it feel smaller than it was. The extra, expanding presence of a stranger already seemed to beat at the walls and make the timbers creak. Through the window, white windmills gleamed out in the bay. The village of Prestatyn-by-the-Sea looked like an impressionist postcard, smudges of dark chalk by the grey water.

I was home-schooled because of my attacks. The only people I saw on a regular basis were my family and Aeron, the blond teenager who worked at the shop just down the road, at the bottom of the mountain. I walked to his shop and back everyday just to get air and exercise, but after a year of seeing him there I still couldn't talk to him. I couldn't talk to boys that I like. I couldn't tell anyone else I even *liked* boys. I could never tell a boy I liked him. It would have physically hurt to push those words out past the bird and lay them at someone's feet. Telling people things lets them inside just a little. Telling someone something as important as “I like you” is like inviting them in, giving them a baseball bat, and telling them to have a go at the antiques. It's shrapnel waiting to happen.

But I wanted to tell boys that I liked them. I read Eira's teen magazines after she got bored with them. I fished them out of the trash when no one was looking and hid them under my mattress, then flipped through them alone in my room after everyone was asleep. They said that boys were thick, and that to get them you had to give them strong signs. Liking a boy meant operating by signals, according to *GirlWorld*, leaving tracks and secret codes on walls, in water, floating in the air you passed through. I wanted to signal Ioan, with his hand in mine, that his eyes looked like "pools of dark water stretching deep into the earth." I'd just read that in my tutor's poetry anthology. Ioan the photographer was the first new person I'd met in almost a year. I didn't even go to church with my family because it made me have an attack. I could feel the Holy Spirit winging around in the rafters, called up by all that praying and all those people *breathing*, and then feathers sat up in my chest and I passed out or vomited or screamed. Ioan was not as cute as Aeron the shopkeeper, but there was something about his eyes. He hadn't let go of my hand. Over his shoulder, Eira made a face at me.

"As I was saying, Gruffydd,"—Mother, sweeping over to Father at the table—"portraits are out, they're just not done. It's very old-fashioned. Gwennie was telling me just last week, this is much more hip. Candid shots, good enough for a magazine. All of us in our natural setting, doing our natural thing." As she talked she took away Father's paper and poured him another cup of coffee. She never let his gruff silence get in the way of her desperate clawing towards a life beyond the lower-middle class. I had learned about the classes that week during home school. My tutor, Mrs. Lloyd, patted her tight white hair and explained to me that some people make very little money, and some people make a lot. There was a picture of a ladder, and the various rungs represented the different levels of people. I asked Mrs. Lloyd where my family fell on the ladder, and she pointed a long finger

to the bottom: *lower class*. I always knew we didn't have much money, but seeing it on a ladder like that, and seeing all the rungs above, made all my mental snapshots of Mother snap into place around each other, a giant puzzle assembling itself into a larger picture.

Father looked at his coffee cup, full and steaming and without his customary milk and sugar, and said "How long is he going to be here?"

"All weekend, darling," Mother said from the sink, moving pots and turning on water and forgetting about Ioan and father's milk and sugar. Her mind moved like a bright bird from branch to branch, never remembering what it was doing before until it circled back around to it. "He'll stay on the couch. Which is quite comfortable, Ioan, nice and soft"—this, called out to Ioan over spitting water and banging pots—"and he'll just go 'round the house, taking pictures of anything and everything. Which means,"—water off, pots forgotten, Mother looming back into the living room with her hands red and wet—"just act like he isn't here. Right, Ioan?"

A white smile from the stranger. "Just all of you do what you normally do. Listen to music, read, watch the television." His voice was small like his mouth but deep like his eyes.

"I want to go into town to see my friends," said Eira, blonde and twelve and possessed of both our share of boldness.

"Not this weekend," Mother said in that voice that all mothers have, commanding and bronze. "This weekend we are a family. And Ioan,"—she smiled, touching his arm again—"Ioan, Ioan is invisible." She left a mark of soap and water on his sleeve.

I don't remember when the bird woke up. Sometimes I think it was always there, nesting, perched on my bottom-most rib like a gull on a scrub pine branch, sleeping with one black-eyed head under its wing. For years I felt it waiting there, not knowing what it

was, only that sometimes when I was in school or out in the sunlight, something under my bone stirred. Sometime after my twelfth birthday, it leaped.

The first time I had to be sedated, I was taking a math test in a class full of too many students. It was unusually hot; I could smell everyone, hear every movement, every scratch of pencil against paper. A roar of shifts filled my ear. I stared at my paper—long division—but the numbers congealed and coded themselves in front of me. I couldn't understand a thing. The teacher stood up and started walking towards me—was I making a noise?—and there it was, sharp dirty feathers against my heart. I crashed down, I could still see but I couldn't, and I knew I was screaming.

Doctors told me I had agoraphobia, that these were panic attacks, and they gave me drugs. I tried to tell a therapist in Cardiff, who had kind eyes and pale fishy hands, that there was something alive inside me that wasn't me, that wanted out, that leapt to signal its imprisonment everytime it saw an avenue of rescue—a passing stranger, the open sky. “Why don't you let it go?” the therapist asked me once. He watched me from behind gold-rimmed glasses, scribbling cryptic marks across his yellow pad. “Why don't you just let it out?” I didn't know how to tell him that I couldn't do that. This was more than panic, than anxiety. No medication was going to help this, but how do you say that to a therapist? My grandfather knew what was in me, knew it had to be caged, that I'd been given a charge from birth to keep it hidden and secret and powerless to do harm to others. An image of Grandfather Gruffydd's hands, rough as brown wood, wrapped around a teacup, flashed into my mind. Instead I told the therapist, “It's stronger than me. It's going to tear me apart from the inside out.”

He asked me what it felt like, physically. That's when I knew it was a bird, because the only word I could think of for the thing that spread apart inside me was “wings.”

* * * *

The first “candid” shot was of Eira and me painting Eira’s room. Mother forced us into father’s old flannel shirts, armed us with paintbrushes tipped in cornflower blue, and unleashed us against the beige wall like hound on the gutted carcass of a stag. At fourteen and twelve, there was little finesse in the way we slapped paint up and down the wall, making a patchy coat of blue against the beige. Behind us, Ioan took pictures, click after click. The first photo made me freeze up. The bird shifted, antagonized, alert, like a weight pushing from one lung to the other. But then *click, click, click*, he kept on, while Mother watched approvingly from the doorway and called out advice. “Eira, extend your arm some more. Rhys, watch your head, don’t block your sister.” As she talked, as the camera’s *click* become just another noise, like the whine of night insects you eventually forget to hear, and the bird settled down. The familiar presence of my family and the house overrode the strange boy and his camera. I wanted to tell Ioan that there was nothing candid about the painting, that it wasn’t something we ever did, especially Eira and me, because we didn’t get along, but I knew that Ioan must see how staged everything was. He was just doing his job. I stabbed my brush against the wall. To like a “real” family, we had to be posed.

After a while, Eira flung down her brush. “I’m hungry,” she said, and retreated to the kitchen for a snack, followed by our mother. I put my brush down, too, more gently. Ioan fiddled with his camera. “Good timing, anyway,” he said. “I need to reload the film.”

I turned away from him. The bird, usually quiet in the house, leaped and struggled against my ribs. It was partly because Ioan was a stranger, and partly because he was cute. I wondered what he looked like without his shirt.

“Are you all right?” He asked it quietly, as if he wasn’t sure he wanted to but unable to keep the words tumbling from his mouth.

The question—his attention, his scrutiny—made me freeze up . “I’m fine. Why?”

He shrugged. “You seem nervous. Don’t like having your picture taken?”

I laughed, a nervous little laugh, a sparkling dog-legged kind of thing, and said truthfully, “No. I’m not really used to it.”

“Well,” Ioan said, walking towards the door, “just try to relax. Be natural.” He looked right at me. “It’s fun to be photographed. You know, just let yourself be. Let the camera in. It’s really cool.” He put one hand on the door, the camera hanging from his neck, and cocked his head at me. It reminded me of the way seagulls look at you when they know you have food in your hand: appreciative, appraising. “You have a really interesting look,” he said.

The compliment hit me hard, a double impact of excitement and anxiety. “How so?” No one ever noticed me that way. Being examined so closely and deeply by someone I barely knew made me nauseous, made beak and claw prick hard against my insides. On the other hand, I was alone with a handsome boy who was looking at me. *Looking* at me. That made the bird dance from foot to foot on its perch inside my chest, but it felt different than normal. Not desperate, but restless.

Ioan stepped back into the room. “Everything. Your bone structure, your blond hair.” He pointed two fingers at me and moved them up and down like he was tracing the outline of my body in the air. “Your frame. Long lines and all that. You’re very elfin, very old world. All the photography students at university would want to use you as a model.” He laughed. “Of course, they’d make you do ridiculous things like run around in your underwear with branches strapped to your head, as long as they could get a cool shot out of it.”

I couldn't imagine exposing my scrawny body to Ioan, much less a group of fit college boys, a pack of male sinew judging and comparing and using me for their shots. "Is that what all photography students do at university?" I asked.

Ioan rested one hand on his camera, tapped one finger against it as he considered me. "I don't. Nothing so silly. For you I'd do a beach shot, probably. In the sunlight, on the sand. Something classical, and mythic." As he talked, he looked at and then through me, to where his vision of me flickered just behind my physical self, better and more brilliant than I could ever be in reality.

Eira bounded back into the room, chocolate in her mouth. "All right, I'm ready now." She picked up her paintbrush and dabbed it across my shirt, casual and cruel. I flinched away from her. Ioan looked away from me, down at his camera, the moment between us escaping back into the dark space where it came from. "I'll be right back, I just need to use the restroom," he said, and left the room.

Eira must have noticed my face, must have seen something of disappointment and elation, because she jabbed me again with her paintbrush and said "What's wrong with you?" It was the same thing Ioan had asked me, but Eira spoke a different language, the language of siblings and mutual dislike.

When I went downstairs on Sunday morning, everyone was dressed for church and Ioan was asleep on the couch. His brown-socked feet hung over the edge and dangled in the air. He snored. "You're going to church?" I whispered to Mother in the kitchen.

"Of course, dear, don't be silly. Why wouldn't we? Eira, go put on your church shoes, not your sneakers." Mother issued commands in a stage whisper as she buttered toast and refilled coffee cups.

I wrapped my blanket more tightly around my shoulders. “Are you taking Ioan with you?”

Mother laughed. “Does it look like he’s going with us? We’ll only be gone an hour. He’ll still be asleep when we get back.” She looked at me, probably saw panic throbbing slowly to life in my face, and walked over to me. “Just stay in your room, Rhys. We’ll be back in an hour. You don’t have to talk to him if he wakes up. Heaven forbid. Honestly, he’s harmless. You’ve seen that all day yesterday.”

The four of them bustled outside, hunkered into the cold car, and sped down into the village. I was left alone with Ioan. I peeked into the living room. He was still asleep.

I sat at the kitchen table and drank Father’s leftover coffee. I listened intently for any sign of life from the living room, mouth against my coffee cup, a small deer poised for a delicate drink, white tail lifted and alert, the faint ring of oil on the coffee’s black surface cast pale in the kitchen light.

Ioan, who was suddenly standing in the entryway of the kitchen, coughed politely. He smiled at me; his smile made the bird flutter, but something else, too—deep in, just the same, but on a different level entirely. “Do you want some coffee?” I asked, then realized the only coffee was in the used cups already sitting on the table. The scarred pot was dark with dregs and steam and nothing else.

“I’ll just put a kettle of tea on, if that’s all right.” He hesitated. “Would you like some?”

I knew Ioan couldn’t be that much older than me. Nineteen, twenty. How much was my mother paying him? We drank tea in silence at the table. He smiled a lot, like an animal showing its teeth but with the opposite intent—“See, I’m friendly!” as opposed to

“Back off.” The clock read 9:15; forty-five minutes until my family came back. The bird struggled at first, but calmed down as the seconds ticked by.

What would it be like to go on a date with Ioan? Maybe we’d sit just like we were in the kitchen, at a table in a restaurant or pub, drinking cider instead of tea. He’d tell funny stories about the glittering world of university, as far away and strange to me as the kingdom of the *anmmn*, with their palaces of coral and halls of bone. I’d laugh into my cider and explain that to me the world was medieval because it was all so far away. I never saw any of it. I could have taken drugs to calm me down long enough for a car trip or train ride, but I’d never wanted to do that badly enough. To me, the house was the world, and Ioan was an alien come to visit.

Ioan blew on his milky tea. “I got some good individual shots of your sister yesterday, Rhys, but hardly any of you.”

I didn’t look at him.

Something clicked, flashed, whirred. Ioan lowered the camera from his face. He’d taken my picture.

Wings beat inside my chest. It was like someone had pulled open my ribs and photographed my heart. It had been fine the day before, posed in “normal” activities, surrounded by everyone else, but not alone. I remembered seeing a TV show where a tame horse panicked and reared, its eyes white and rolling. I reared. I stood up.

“I thought maybe we could do some of you before your family gets back and things get sort of crazy again,” Ioan said, adjusting the settings on his camera. It was sleek and black, neat and dangerous as a weapon in his long-fingered hands. “Anywhere in particular you’d like to do it?”

Something about the way he held the camera, the way he posed the question as if completely sure of the answer, made me feel like a hostage, held at gunpoint. The bird beat and beat and beat against my chest, wing and tide. My breathing became fast and shallow as a creek running over a rocky bed; heat rushed into my face. I couldn't turn away from him, couldn't turn my back on a predator, so I backed away, bumped into my chair, winced as it scraped against the linoleum. Concern stole into his expression. His voice came to me as if from underwater: "Are you all right? What's wrong?"

Then I thought of a place we could go where the bird would be quiet and not get in the way of whatever happened, whatever I hoped would happen. Where I used to go visit my grandfather, to feel quiet inside. A place Ioan himself suggested the day before.

"The beach," I said. Just the thought of it, just the savory, salty way the word "beach" felt as it rolled across my lips, soothed me, settled me, a rock sinking into water.

He smiled, and cocked his head at me like he had yesterday in that moment when he looked at me as more than a client's young son, as an artist looks at his subject, his muse. "All right." He stood. "That sounds great. Go ahead and get changed, I'll meet you outside."

In my room, I was safe and out of sight. I put on a thin blue button-up shirt and a pair of khaki shorts. My whole body throbbed hot with panic and exultation at what I'd just done. Everything inside me was in motion, unlike the still summer air outside. My window was small and half-curtained, a private peephole out into the galaxy of town, mountain, sea. An old stone church down by the shore rang a bell every Sunday, calling the people to service. From there I could see the bell's dark swing in the tower, the sound muffled by space and glass. It was 9:30. My family would come back from church in half an hour.

I pushed the window open. Everything outside smelled of stone and salt water. The morning sun limned the top of the mountain, which hung black and cold above the house. Cool shadows covered the front garden, but golden light bathed everything just beyond. There was no sound but a faint whisper of wind through the trees and, in the distance, the constant hum and glide of the ocean. There were no clouds, and no breeze. Everything waited.

My grandfather used to say that first you hear the sea, then you smell it, then you see it. It unrolled before us that way as we traipsed down the side road towards the shore, passing behind the untidy back gardens of split houses and flats. I loved the sea. By the sea, I could be silent and still and absolutely free of the bird. It balmed me with gentle roar, salt, and wet. In the presence of a greater entity than itself, everything inside me quailed with respect and awe.

I'd seen pictures of beaches in the Carribean and in Florida, places of blinding white sand and sapphire water. The sand of the Welsh shore, however, was anything but white, a grey mongrel color and usually littered with trash and wrack from the tide. The water itself looked dark and angry even in daylight, seeming to promise cold and danger with every slap of white foam against the dirt. It wasn't the kind of beach where you sunbathed or went swimming. I loved it for that; it seemed like something beyond tourists and suntan lotion, something with a soul and an ancient quality. Even the sunlight was cold. Seabirds wheeled above us, and in the distance the white windmills that powered the coast revolved like the curious masts of alien ships far out at sea, scouting for a safe harbor.

Ioan wore boots. He jumped off the jetty onto the sand, splashing through puddles and marching off across the dark expanse of sand towards the water. I jumped down more

carefully, and then on second thought took off my trainers. I held them in one hand and followed Ioan across the shore, around pools of water and clumps of rock. The sand was cold and hard under my bare feet. A breeze lifted off the sea and played up under my shirt.

Ioan stopped a few feet from the water, then abruptly turned around and snapped a picture of me. The snap caught me by surprise again. When I looked up, Ioan smiled and lifted his lens for another attack.

At the kitchen table that morning, when he photographed me, panic spread wide under my throat and lifted me off the chair. Now that sensation felt pleasantly muddled and confused, asleep under the blanket of the ocean. I put down my trainers and turned to look at the sea. Ioan took rapid pictures of me, circling around to the side, out of my peripheral vision. It was easy, in the sun and the noise of the surf and the complete lack of anyone else on the beach, to pretend that he wasn't there. For a while he vanished from my perception and I was alone. I sat on the cold sand, ignoring how it clung wet and heavy to my shorts, and smiled into the sky.

“I used to look for the people under the sea here,” I said.

The camera clicked nearby, and suddenly Ioan was there again, out of sight but present. I felt him like a warm dark star, flickering with interest behind me. “You mean, like mermaids?” he asked.

“Sort of.” I rubbed my heel against the sharp edge of a stone. Not enough to cut, just hard enough to feel. “My grandfather used to tell me that the people under the sea, the *annwn*, were responsible for all the bad things that people do, basically. I used to look for them, so they could fix me.”

“Fix what?” Ioan came up beside me. All I could see were his jeans, and the camera dangling from his hand. “You don't look broken to me,” he said above me.

I knew from TV that was the kind of thing boys said, things that sounded like flirting or interest but usually was just them being nice. I let the comment pass over me like a barely felt breeze and told Ioan about my problem. I used the technical terms—panic, agoraphobia—because even though I thought he *might* understand the real story, I *knew* he would understand the medicine, the tacticle language of forms, diagnoses, tiny print and prescriptions. There wasn't an easy translation for what I really felt, a white lump somewhere deep leaping to attention every time a seabird wheeled overhead and cried out for food. But then, maybe Ioan was different. The way he talked about his work, about letting things in. He might know the language I knew, could hear about the bird in my chest and know what I meant; an educated older man, experienced in the darkneses and dangers of the world outside Prestatyn, outside my own house. I held that knowledge like a hot brick against my heart there as Ioan listened to me, really listened like no one had since Grandfather Gruffydd died, and I loved him for one powerful second.

“The ocean calms me down,” I concluded. “I think it’s the noise, or the smell, or something. Usually I’m too nervous to even walk through town.”

“Hence our picturesque detour.” He sat quiet and still next to me, holding what I’d said as carefully as his camera, unsure what to do with it. “You seem okay right now.” Then, quickly, shortly, as if coming to a decision: “Here, hold this.”

Ioan placed the camera gently in my hands. I cradled it to my chest. It was heavy, like a loaded weapon, but warm from the heat of his hands. He sat down next to me on the sand—his face, lined briefly in sunlight—and kicked off his shoes and socks, began turning up the cuffs of his jeans.

“What are you doing?”

Ioan smiled, then stood up—the smile sank up out of view like the morning sun climbing towards noon. “I’m going in for a wade. It’s hot. Join?”

“The water’s freezing,” I said, but Ioan was already gone, at a slight run, his heels kicking up a fine spray of sand. At the water he hesitated, then jumped into the tide with both feet like a child willfully exploding their boots into a puddle. Spray enveloped him, and behind a curtain of white droplets caught rainbow by the sun, he laughed. A surge of tide knocked him off balance and he fell headfirst into the water, his white shirt plastering instantly to his lean body like a filmy second skin.

I laughed, too. He emerged from the water, waved at me. I waved back. Then, on a whim, I lifted the camera to my eye and poised my finger over the silver button at the top. He seemed much further away through the lens—small and indistinct, like the idea of a man more than the reality. He waved at me again through the lens. He looked sort of like a sea person himself, drenched and shining in the light. I always imagined the people under the sea as strange, alien, possessed of terrifying aquatic forms, but then I thought that if they were the root of all humanity’s dissatisfaction then maybe they weren’t so different after all. Maybe they were all just like Ioan, bronzed and sleek with clean mouths full of bone-white. I steadied my hand and pushed the silver button on top of the camera. Something snapped, whirred. I lowered it; Ioan was gone, dog-paddling around in the shallows. I wondered if I’d caught him in time, if when he developed the film he would look at the image of himself and remember the quick finger that caught it.

The walk back to the house was easier for me. Again, I stayed slightly behind while Ioan led, though I held the camera because he was wet. I wore the musky strap around my neck and held the camera with both hands, feeling its weight of importance like it was a baby

or a bomb. Ioan stripped off his shirt and put his shoes on without socks; the socks he carried in one hand and the shirt in the other. Drops of water caught and held in the swell of his back. The road was bare and treeless, hedged on both sides by a high stone wall. Here and there, a few bright yellow flowers grew out of the top of the stone wall, little trumpet-like blossoms announcing the arrival of summer.

Back inside the house, Ioan went into the bathroom then held out his wet shirt and jeans from behind the half-closed door. I traded him a robe and went to put his wet things in the dryer. We were alone in the house. The rush and tumble of the dryer seemed to fill up the space and push the quiet and sunlight into the corners, leaving room in the middle for the trembling, wire-thin sensation I felt spreading in my chest, vibrating in time with the frequency of Ioan's whistle as he left the bathroom and came up behind me in the laundry nook. I turned and was practically pressed against him. He'd loosely tied the robe so it hung open like old folds of grey skin over his still-wet chest. "Throw my socks in, too," he said, handing them to me.

I closed my fingers over the soaked white, tugged them from his hands, then closed my eyes and leaned in. Maybe the magazines had it wrong. Maybe getting boys wasn't so much about bait-and-hook as it was about jumping so fast they had no time to get out of the way. I opened my mouth and felt a gentle push of air as Ioan leaned in.

Years later, I was in bed with my boyfriend, a London stockbroker named Clive. Clive always looked wild and unshaved despite his dapper suits. "Tell me about your first time," he said. He liked things like that. He liked me to talk about the sex I'd had with other men while he fucked me and called me a bad boy. He rested his head on my stomach, ear against my hipbone as if listening for the sea. It was dark, but I could see his grin. White

teeth in a small mouth. My first time was with a boy I'd known at college, but instead I told Clive about Ioan.

“You liked them older even then, huh?” Clive ran an animal hand up my side. “Why didn't he kiss you back?”

I hadn't thought about it in years. At first, trying to recall the exact contour and shape of what happened was like feeling my way to an unfamiliar bathroom in a dark apartment, unsure of walls and edges, waiting for my vision to deepen and darken though it never quite goes far enough. From the vantage point of Clive's bed, I could look back and see the faint outline of that day with Ioan by the seashore, Prestatyn and my parents' house, all wrapped in a fog of negative light. Maybe Ioan wasn't interested in me, or interested in boys at all. Maybe I was a kid to him. But something held fast under me, a corner of something weighed down like the sheet under my elbow, secured like the edge of a picnic blanket by a stone. Ioan wanted to kiss me, but maybe he pulled back when he looked into my open mouth and saw a pair of black eyes, taking aim. Instead he kissed my forehead, then drew his robe more tightly and wandered into another part of the house while I slumped back against the dryer, vibrating like piano wire struck by a hammer, singing out silently and for the first time feeling as if I could fold in on myself, that there was an empty space inside me that I could claim and withdraw into. Why didn't he kiss me? Maybe because standing there in front of me with my mouth wide and pink and waiting to be claimed, I had foolishly allowed something dangerous to wake and pass out of me.

CHAPTER FOUR: TWO BLADES COME TOGETHER, THINGS COME APART

A bruise in the shape of a bird spreads purple and yellow across Cameron's mother's arm. The sleeve of her threadbare blue sweater barely covers the edge. It makes me think of the time I almost hit Rosalind, right before we broke up. It was our last big argument, and for the first time in our relationship she said something mean and personal about me. She spat it into my face—"you wuss, you fucking faggot"—and I grabbed her arm and felt myself start to twist from the inside, like everything in me wanted to wring an apology from her bones. When she said "You're hurting me," I let her go and moved out. Cameron's mother is less beautiful than Rosalind. Her name is Inara and she is young and dark but not pretty. She catches me looking at the massive bruise on her and tugs the sleeve of her sweater down further, hiding it completely. She does not smile or say goodbye to her son. He ignores her likewise.

Cameron is one of my favorite patients, even though at twelve years old he's still making very little progress. He suffers from Gregor's syndrome, which diminishes cognitive/linguistic function. He has a difficult, sometimes impossible, time putting his thoughts into words, responding to conversation, or even identifying objects. It's actually a very basic speech impediment, but it's rare to be so pronounced and tenacious in a child of Cameron's age. Today we try some simple repetition exercises, like Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady*. We sit by the long bank of windows, our tiny orange chairs pulled close together. I say "ah" and Cameron says "aawwwwwehhhhoooo" like a thin wolf caught and starved in a jaw trap, bleating his vowels to the moon that has just begun to appear in the darkening

blue sky outside the window, a silver ghost slyly showing itself for the first time. Cameron looks down at the street where the wind knocks together the tough branches of apple trees along the sidewalk and bleats. I gently turn his face back toward mine and say into his face: “Ah.” Confused, he pulls his head out of my grip and reaches for a stuffed bear, one of our recognition objects that doubles as comfort. One of its eyes has long since been lost, leaving only a pale scar on its fur and the hint of a snapped stitch.

Cameron’s mother comes to pick him up an hour later. Even though he’s almost thirteen, she tries to take his hand. He leans away from her. “How did we do today, Dr. Amasa?” she asks like she always does, her voice a high chime of hope against the quiet murmur of the office. Worry lines her eyes like someone who smiles too much, but I’ve never seen her do that.

“Just fine.” It’s not up to me to tell her that Cameron’s pronunciation and vowels haven’t improved in the weeks he’s been coming to therapy. That’s up to Marianne, my boss. She gets the thankless task of taking a parent, a husband, or a sister aside and telling them that their loved one will never get their speech back. It’s a delicate task, taking the words as if they were made of glass and laying them carefully in trembling laps. She will have to give these words to Cameron’s mother soon, and I’m glad I won’t have to look at her face when she does.

Inara leads Cameron away. He mumbles a goodbye at the floor. Inara looks down at him as they walk, and then turns her head back for a moment to see if I heard him.

I smile and nod. In the fluorescent light of the hallway, with her head turned that way, she even *looks* like Rosalind. It occurs to me: I more than twisted her arm. I twisted and pulled her towards me as I cocked my other arm back, high and tight like a pitcher at the top of his windup. She wore a red sweater—she was always cold in her own apartment—

and held a wooden spoon. A slick shine of grease on it caught the light as she brought it up; to shield herself or to attack me back, I don't know. She'd been sauteeing peppers and onions for our dinner, and I actually drew my arm back and started to bring it down on her. I might have broken her nose, or knocked her sideways against the stove, or at the very least left a deep red handprint on the pristine whiteness of her face. I might have twisted her arm harder and left a bruise on her just like the one on Inara's arm. Did Inara call her husband a fucking faggot? Did she dig some other word into him like a knife?—"Bastard," "Motherfucker," "*Maricon*." Maybe she just mumbled a response to a question and he heard challenge in the static, both of them unable to hear each other as he reached out and snatched her away from the dinner table, Cameron watching silently from behind his forkful of Hamburger Helper.

My mother hit my father once, to get her point across. I was eleven; it was Friday night and we'd ordered pizza, eating and watching television together. Both my parents walked into the kitchen. One said something to the other; they started shouting, which wasn't unusual, but then I heard a sharp *crack*. When I turned around, my father was looking at my mother with a look of disbelief and a red handprint on his stubbled face. My mother was looking at the stove, holding one hand in the other as if trying to hold it back from what it was capable of. They didn't speak to each other for days, and even when they did, something was different, some undertone or subtext to the way they talked that I didn't understand. It was like music had gone out of their conversation. I wrote an essay about that for my admissions essay into the graduate speech therapy program at my university. I cited it as the defining moment of my life where I knew that I wanted to devote my time and energy to helping words, helping speech, so that it would never be necessary to ask again, to misunderstand, to hit, to fire upon.

After Cameron and his mother leave, I make myself a cup of peppermint tea before leaving for the night. The other speech therapists tidy their desks and make plans to go for drinks. There are six of us, plus staff, in the large red-paneled office on Hierosa Street, looking out over the slim blue hook of the river and the apple trees and, in the distance, the skyscrapers and golden domes of downtown. I'm the youngest of the speech therapists, even though my hairline is rapidly receding back over my head. The others who have been here longer and who have reputations treat me with a mixture of respect and distance. They aren't sure what to make of the twenty-eight year old kid, the new doctor with the dark Eastern eyes and the foreign name and the complete lack of accent. I'm working on a probationary basis as an intern at the office, and Gregor's syndrome is one of the most basic speech impediments to rehabilitate. They've given me Cameron as a test of my base-level ability.

Marianne, fortunately, goes out of her way to be nice to me. Tonight she comes over to where I'm having my cup of tea and folds her arms. "Hi, Ben. How was Cameron?"

I close my eyes and shake my head a little, focused on the hot slip of peppermint into my throat.

She sighs. Marianne is a beautiful older woman, the kind of person who is both attractive and refined. There is nothing vulgar about her. Sometimes I catch myself wondering what she looked like when she was my age, or if there is a picture of her somewhere in her office that I haven't seen: thirty-year-old Marianne caught in the unexpected freeze of a camera, forever gorgeous and on fire with youth in the confines of a cheap gilt frame. I chalk this up to loneliness; I've been single for two months. I haven't dated anyone since I broke up with Rosalind.

“Well.” Then, a long silence. Marianne perches on the edge of saying things, usually before taking a blunt dive, like she does now: “Is Cameron going to get any better?”

I set my cup down on the windowsill. Outside, all the cars driving down Hierosa, heading across the river to the sparkling spires of downtown, flick on their lights as if following a prearranged signal beaming towards them out of the evening. “I don’t know,” I say honestly. “His speech dysmorphia is the worst problem, and we’re working on that, but even his basic formation of vowels is severely flawed. He isn’t responding to anything.” Unspoken is my defensive, knee-jerk addendum of “This is my first patient; I’m a new doctor, and an intern here. Give me time.”

“Do you need more time?” Marianne asks, as if tracing the wire of my thoughts with her hand and abruptly yanking it out of my head.

“Maybe.” I’m irritated. My tea is cooling, it’s getting dark. I want to go home. I don’t want Cameron to be my problem anymore because nothing is working. After weeks of therapy three or four times a week, he still can’t even match words to objects. Instead of “remote control,” it’s “thing that makes the TV come on.” Instead of “scissors,” it’s “that thing, you know—two blades come together, things come apart.”

“Ben.” Marianne stands very close to me. I can almost feel her angles, the danger of her teeth. “He’s had almost two months. There should have been improvement. Can Cameron benefit from more therapy?”

I don’t want to challenge her or make a promise I can’t keep, but I say, “Yes.”

Marianne nods. “Fine. We’ll give it a month. After that…” She waves her hand sharply through the air as she walks away, almost a salute, a sideways guillotine of a gesture, then walks away.

I leave the office with Marianne's doubts corkscrewing their way into my brain. Standing on the Hierosa Street sidewalk is like standing on the riverbank. The traffic is thick and slow as the current in summer; everyone's heading into downtown for Friday night revelry of the kind that I never experienced, the kind I watched from luminous and sedate downtown bars with Rosalind and her coworkers from the ad agency. The miniature oak trees that the city planted up and down the sidewalk for a beautification project have dropped their final load of leaves, crushed into dark-red piles on the concrete. The sun leaves the sky completely, taking all warmth with it. The street is alive with traffic and pedestrians, but all I can hear are the real words behind Marianne's talk with me: *Ben Amasa, you're failing*. It's like when you watch a movie in a foreign language you haven't studied since high school. You read the subtitles, but every so often you hear a stitch of phrasing that you remember, a shimmer of true language behind the noise. *Failing*. I never failed at anything, except my relationship with Rosalind. It's remarkably similar to my problem with Cameron. In both cases, a communication failure. In both cases, a failure in the power of words, order, and logic. An unpleasant sensation slides through my gut, like the hunger you get from being sick and unable to keep anything down. I pull open my cell phone. Rosalind's number flashes up, bright and black on the screen. I hit "send"—despite the fact that, like eating something when you're nauseous, I know nothing good can come of it—and lift the phone to my ear.

Our conversation is brief and terse, but Rosalind agrees to meet me the next morning at the open air market. The market is on the other side of the river, laced around the edge of downtown, clinging to the concrete banks of the river like a carnival fungus of tents, booths, and tables full of crap. I want to remind her of all the Saturday mornings in

our relationship that we came here. Every Saturday for a year we got up, had sex in the shower, drank too much coffee, and wandered down to the market from her apartment on the glittering, modern stretch of Declan Avenue. We spent every Saturday for a year sifting through junk and inhaling the sweat and incense of the vendors, looking for a vase with character or an overlooked piece of Depression glass, mottled and etched in the palest of blues.

I wait for her on a green bench by our favorite stall, the Renaissance Faire woman who makes and sells her own incense sticks. Our first morning at the market, after our first night together, our first time falling asleep in each other's arms, the woman gave us a free pack of incense sticks because she told us we looked so much in love. We bought ten for a dollar from her every Saturday after that, and never used them. For all I know, they still sit in a box in Rosalind's closet, the cheap musk of lavender and sandalwood like a pungent ghost hiding in the dark. I hold a Styrofoam cup of coffee in my hand, my back to the river and the tin-grey sky.

Rosalind materializes out of the morning crowd like a sprite, her slight body garlanded by a brown coat and the close darkness of her hair. She holds herself stiff and apart, not like the mornings before when, with me, we melted and flowed together, becoming a part of the organism of the market, laughing and warm. She hasn't let her hair grow since the last time I saw her, a little over two months ago. I can imagine her in front of a mirror every week, honing the edge of her hair with a blade.

When she sees me, there is no flicker of recognition, no jet propulsion of happiness springing up under her faded leather boots and pushing her forward. It's as if she isn't expecting to run into me but, having caught my eye, barely masks her irritation at being

socially obligated to say hello. Which, given the circumstances of our breakup, she isn't. Except that I asked her to meet me here.

Rosalind sits down on the bench and puts her purse between us. She's the kind of woman who dresses stylishly but wears very little makeup other than lipstick, preferring to costume her body and not her face, which she finds unattractive but which has always fascinated me. It's a Roman face, proud and powerful and sharp-nosed. She doesn't turn to look at me when she asks "How are you, Ben?" She says it from a height, a superior deigning to inquire after her employee. It reminds me with a sting that she is older than me. For a moment I wonder what we must look like, the slim pale woman and the slim dark man, like two whittled chess pieces sitting stiffly next to each other by the river.

I sip my coffee. "I got that job at the Peyroux Group, with Dr. Attlesey." Marianne's last name feels alien in my mouth. I let this speak for itself, sip my coffee again. I jumped right to success, to showing off, as if to say "Look at all the good that has come of our break-up." I went on the interview three days before Rosalind and I broke up. Marianne really was Dr. Attlesey, then, and Rosalind and I still rubbed against each other in desperate frustration, less like animals and more like knives, the sound of our kisses an unpleasant *shwing* in the night. A few days after I moved all my things out of Rosalind's apartment, Marianne Attlesey called and offered me the internship, and I pulled myself out of my moping for the sake of a job.

"That's nice," Marianne says after a moment, and because I know her, I know that the lightness of her tone, almost airy, indicates that she really means it. She really thinks it's nice. She and I were together during the last year of my post-grad work, during all my final tests and my projects and thesis and the interviews I went on in five different cities. She suffered through that hard part, that limbo between academics and reality, with me, and I

guess I shouldn't be surprised that she really is happy it all worked out, if only because it means I wasn't a complete waste of her time. But then part of me flares, angry and indignant that she should stake any claim in my success, so I don't say anything back. For minutes we sit quietly, almost visibly struggling to unearth the proper words for the situation, for what we're feeling. Our backs are to the river, but we can hear and smell a huge riverboat going by, like the old-fashioned kind they have in the South, a tourist attraction that we have never gone on. The market spreads out before us. A little girl points insistently at a pink umbrella hanging from the top of a stall like a beautiful fruit dangling teasingly from the highest branches of a tree. Her mother ignores her.

Rosalind picks up her purse. "I'm meeting a friend for lunch." She means this to be a subtle reminder to get on with it, though it's anything but. She's beautiful in her impatience, a sleek firecracker making no secret of her impending explosion. Sex was this way with us before we stopped having it, both of us vibrating like strange toys at an incendiary frequency only we could hear, sensing it in each other from separate rooms, or over the phone after a long day at work. But her vibration now is annoyance, not lust. The sun is getting high and hot. More marketgoers spill thickly into the musty walkways between stalls. The crowd draws Rosalind away, and with a sigh of impatience she gets up to leave. The coffee cup is half full and lukewarm in my hands.

There are my moments, with my patients, where whatever condition or syndrome or impairment they have unexpectedly and mysteriously gives way beneath the sweet, simple weight of words and they have, for a few moments, a clear shot at actually saying something without the stammer, or the mumbling. These moments happen most often when a breakthrough is near, like Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* singing "the rain in Spain stays mainly on the plain," free from her Cockney accent. Rosalind's back is to me. She takes a

few steps, radiating annoyance that I wasted her time—and for a moment whatever it is that’s been choking me, fear or anger or anxiety, slips its ratty cloth out of my mouth. I intend to say something dashing and romantic. I intend to apologize for the time I hurt her, almost hit her in the kitchen. But all that comes out is, “I miss you.”

Rosalind stops, turns her head slightly. Not a glint of hesitation on the smooth calm surface of her lake as she pours herself back through the crowd to stand in front of me. The sun is behind her, a dark figure surrounded by a grey-and-golden nimbus in the overcast morning, casting her shadow right onto my face. She hoists her bag farther up on her arm, tightens her grip on it as if preparing for an impact.

“I miss you,” I say again, simply. I squint up at her, forcing one eye open, trying to smile. For a second I think it’s just a trick of lighting and nonexistent breakfast when she smiles back, her thin lips creasing apart like the flaps of an envelope to reveal her small, strangely sharp teeth. The mouth of a predator. The thin lines of her torso, her black slacks, reach out to that nauseous hunger I felt on the street in front of the office, the shape of some inner, mythic stomach for love matching the shape of her body and her arms. I reach out and touch her hand once, then withdraw. Something lurks just under the surface of her eyes. She’s judging me; she’s holding me in one hand and weighing it against what hurt we did each other, and seeing which comes up wanting. I try to think of something to say, some evidence to tip my side of the scales, but then she is very close and I can smell gin and perfume light against her mouth which suddenly presses against my cheek. Acquittal, acquittal, acquittal.

Rosalind takes me back to her apartment. We lie in her bed, half-undressed, and we embrace, trading soft kisses, almost cuddling, but desire is strangely absent; arousal doesn’t

come into play. She falls asleep in my arms, remarkably soft for such a hard, angular woman.

After a while I disentangle myself from her and roam the studio apartment, restless as always in the space we shared but which was always truly hers. I watch a DVD I find on the coffee table that I take to be a collection of Rosalind's latest commercials for the ad agency where she works. It features a strange array of attractive minorities pushing various products. I turn it off and walk around, refamiliarizing myself with the landscape of the apartment. The ceiling vaults upward, giving the place the vast, echoing feel of a cathedral, decorated in stainless steel and dark woods. Here and there, wrought iron blooms against the white walls in the form of sconces, hat racks, a lamp. The furniture, always minimal, has been moved. I walk through like a traveler in a strange maze, learning the new turns and dead-ends. Still, some things are familiar: a vase I bought, a picture frame I hung, the way I arranged her cups on their hooks over the stove. A buoyant happiness inflates me, high and tight in my chest. On the riverbank I wondered why she gave in, why she leaned in and kissed my cheek and led me back to her apartment. Was she surprised? Lonely? Taking pity on me? But the fact that Rosalind didn't erase these traces of me, that she allowed me to see them, sends a clear message in the language of an ad executive: "I missed you, too. Welcome back."

The first fight happens at dinner. Rosalind waits until we order our drinks and appetizers, then pounces. "Well? What did you think?"

I chew on a breadstick. "Of what?" I ask, trying to buy time, though I know exactly what she's talking about.

She sighs. Her tiny nostrils flare—a cute facial tic, except that I know the explosive irritation that usually kindles behind it. “Of my commercials. You said you watched the DVD while I was napping?”

“Ah.” Yes, the commercials. Muscular half-naked gay men downing Coronas and casting powerful bleached smiles at each other like weapons. After that, a troupe of attitudinal, upper-class black women sitting around a table drinking coffee and having a *View*-style discussion about the latest advancement in tampon technology. Next, a young Indian couple professing their love for a local supermarket chain.

Rosalind taps a breadstick on the table. It breaks in half. “Well?”

The silver candlesticks stand tall and elegant between us like guards. I could lie—be polite, feed her ego, compliment her artistic vision—but the truth is that the commercials bothered me. When we were dating, when Rosalind first started working for the agency, she’d been responsible for print ads. At one time or another, huge mock-ups cluttered her normally pristine apartment, all of them featuring beautiful Caucasian twenty-somethings hawking sunblock or shoes or Florida vacation packages; no sign of an African-American, or even a person of less-than-disposable income. Rosalind filled her days creating false realities for rich white people. We fought about it more than once, and she always ended the arguments the same way: “That’s Advertising.” But these new commercials bothered me more. They seemed like an even more glossy hyper-reality, a rich white person’s fantasy vision of minority life. The Indian couple unsettled me the most—both of them extremely attractive, posed in their lovely two-bedroom home in a glittering suburb. Despite myself, I felt the lure of the commercial—shop at Stan-Mart, you can be just like us!—but almost immediately blocked it with angry memories of my Indian father, who could never even

afford a television, much less a house; of my own one-bedroom apartment and my paycheck-to-paycheck existence. I could back down and be nice, but I won't.

"I don't know," I said. "Why is everyone so pretty?"

Rosalind makes a face, clearly not expecting anything more than a vague compliment, then smirks. "That's Advertising. It's what the client wants." She says this slowly and deliberately, leaning forward and enunciating each syllable with extra care right into my face. For a moment, I have the disorienting sensation of being one of my own patients, of being on the receiving, condescending end of a lesson from someone who clearly thinks: "You have no idea what communication is. Let me spell it out for you." Something red and animal rises in my vision. The restaurant recedes; it's only Rosalind and me, facing off over the white linens and guttering candles. For the next few moments, we are nothing but our words:

"You're exploiting stereotypes."

"No, we're marketing to them. Jesus, Ben, before you gave me shit about making ads that only featured hot white girls buying Manolo Blahniks."

I should let this argument with Rosalind go, if only for the sake of a pleasant evening and our tentative reconnection, but I can't. Like a terrier, I latch on and won't let go. It's a familiar, almost pleasant shock, like slipping into the cool waters of a pool after spending too long in the hot tub. Everything—the room, the air, the flame of the candle—seems sharp and alive and dangerous with sex. The words of the argument aren't the important thing—it doesn't matter what we're talking about, or that the people at the tables next to us are turning and looking, some glaring. What matters is the energy behind the words, the challenge. This is primal, this is battle; a line drawn in the sand. It makes me feel alive in a way that sports or exercise or hunting deer in the frozen woods of Connecticut

with my uncles never did. People watch us; the white flash of my teeth reflected in an empty wineglass, Rosalind's red lips dripping disdain for my reasoning onto the table.

By the time the main course arrives, we've fallen silent, changed the subject, barely speaking. Our fire has receded but not gone out; we can both look each other in the eye and feel it smoldering, embers waiting to be stirred. We leave dinner as quickly as possible, and when we get back to her apartment one touch is enough to send up the blaze. We fuck on Rosalind's couch until we sweat and start to slip away from each other in the awkward, slick tangle of jellied arms and trembling legs.

"Come back," she says just before we fall asleep in her huge black bed. She sounds nothing like herself; the voice is small and frail. It could be anyone beside me in the bed, in the dark. I kiss her forehead, touch the remembered angles of her shoulders and arms to remind myself that it's her. As I drift off to sleep, it occurs to me for the first time in a while that I'm the one who actually broke it off the first time.

Cameron has a morning appointment on Mondays as part of his exceptional-student education program at his school. Inara drops him off as usual. Today the bruise has spread from her arm to her eye, like a disease sinking beneath the skin and traveling unseen through the body to emerge in an unexpected place, tattooing you with the secret knowledge of your contamination so that everyone knows to stay away. Cameron doesn't say anything, but that doesn't mean he doesn't notice. That's the thing with most speech therapy patients; because they can't communicate things, there's always a part of you that assumes they also have a problem observing the world, that they don't notice details and subtle distinctions like the rest of us. Unfortunately, this is not the case. The misfire is in the mouth, not the brain. Cameron probably realizes exactly what the thing on his mother's eye is, and maybe watched

it happen. I know nothing about the family except that there is a father. Inara isn't falling down the stairs, though. Their family can barely afford the speech therapy even with Cameron's school public school district discount, much less a two-story house. The sight of Inara's black eye and what it implies makes me nauseous, as if I can smell the violence, taste the impact.

My reconnection with Rosalind energizes me to try harder with Cameron. This is a rejuvenation, a second chance, an opportunity to erase mistakes and push forward to the final goal. One of Cameron's biggest challenges is properly identifying people and things. I line up objects on a table—a red ball, a pencil, a stuffed bear, a magazine, a wrench—and we go through them one by one. “Ball” and “pencil” come easily, but he stumbles over the bear. The magazine stops him cold. He stares blankly at the slick cover with Jude Law grinning up at him. “Paper,” he says. “Paper, shiny—” His long brown hair needs a trim. He brushes it out of his face and squints harder at the magazine. “Paper—”

Even this much is progress. He'd muddled through years of public school, being held back and placed in special needs classes without ever being properly diagnosed. It's not that he's not smart, but something in his brain is cross-wired. The words that come to his mouth circle the image without landing on it. He advanced well enough at first, but for the past two months he's been stuck at the magazine and things like it. He's stopped advancing entirely, which is why I've been frustrated. I think that's why I've been frustrated. It's hard to tell in the morning light of the office, the hum of small noises and the bitter smell of coffee hanging over everything, everything cast in a different light, the light of Rosalind's bed, her shower. Was I frustrated with Cameron, or was it me? I try to recall that feeling of frustration now, but it dies halfway to me, like a weak searchlight swinging in my direction but not strong enough to reach me. This morning Cameron is a welcome challenge. I feel

like I'm stretching muscles that haven't seen exercise in months. Still, no matter what I try—using simpler objects, getting him to name individual parts of a complex object and working his way up to the proper noun—he stumbles and derails, falling into a bad compensational habit of using phrase descriptions when the proper words won't come. When I hold up a pair of scissors, he stutters and says, "It's—two blades come together, things come apart."

He can tell that I'm frustrated, so I play it off. "It's all right, Cam," I say, steering him away from the table. "Why don't we have a break today? You can go sit in the play room and read a book until your mom comes." Cameron raises his eyebrows—I never let him have free time during our sessions—but placidly lets me lead him to the play room.

Inara wears a different outfit when she comes to pick him up—before she was in a tshirt and jeans, now she's in a modest, old-fashioned blue blouse and a long skirt. Dressed for work. Cameron moves to her side but they do not touch. She does not reach for his hand or touch his shoulder. "How did we do today, Dr. Amasa?"

Even this, her usual question, seems flat and lifeless, like she couldn't care less. I try hard not to look at the bruise covering the side of her face. "Well, Dr. Attlesey and I have high hopes for Cameron in the next couple of months here." I smile at Cameron, trying to get them both to ride the wave of my earlier enthusiasm. "We're going to try some more aggressive techniques with him. We should be seeing some real progress soon."

"Soon." She repeats my word—"soon"—short, staccato, trying it out on her own tongue. She nods tightly, barely a movement of her head, and gives me the brief upward lilt of a smile, then leaves. Cameron follows her; he doesn't look at her, or me, or anywhere but the ground or a blank point in space. I punch on my radio and sit down to make some notes on Cameron's file. When I look up a few minutes later, Inara and Cameron are standing in

Marianne's office with their backs to me; Marianne is seated at her desk, her listening face on, hands folded under her chin. I look back down at my notes and try to ignore them. Is she complaining? Praising me? Confessing to Marianne about her abusive husband? I watch them leave out of the corner of my eye and expect that any moment Marianne will walk over and berate me, or deliver a compliment, or give me some gossip. But she stays in her office the rest of the morning. Every now and then, I catch her watching me through the glass.

The second fight is stranger, more brief and more brutal. Knives are drawn almost immediately. We're in bed, dozing after a brief but meltingly intense quickie. Rosalind, in control of the remote, channel surfs without direction or intent. Her legs make ridges in the blue sheets, an alien landscape in the TV light. She comes across a primetime special on abused mothers, and decides to leave it. The photos and testimonies of the victims enflame me. "Why the hell do they stay with these men?" I said. Inara looms up in my mind—more like my idea of Inara than the reality, more beautiful, more brutalized, bleeding from a stab wound, arm hanging out from her body at a sickening angle.

Rosalind the advertiser jumps on this. "Gee, I don't know, Ben. Maybe they're afraid. Maybe they love their husbands. Maybe they're afraid what will happen to their children if they run away with them but can't find a way to support them."

She's a true master of spin, making something uncomplicated into something it's not. "Someone hits you, you leave," I said, "period."

Rosalind slaps me across the mouth—not hard. She used to do that during sex when she was on top, dominating me and making me do what she wanted. She called me a good little boy and slapped me, because a light and unexpected sting of pain during sex

turned me on. She slapped me and I pinned her down and fucked the noise out of her. This time, however, it jars me. I resist the impulse to put my hand against my face where she hit.

In the blue TV light, her dark eyes seem deep and animal, barely human. Her mouth is a colorless sneer. “Well, Ben? Are *you* going to leave?”

When I don’t answer, she laughs—a short, derisive bark—then shuts off the TV and turns over, falls asleep. I sit in the dark for a few heartbeats before swinging my legs off the bed and making my way by memory into the living area. I sleep on the black leather couch, the fabric stiff and cold against my bare skin in Rosalind’s chilly apartment.

A friend told me, when Rosalind and I had problems before, that we should go to couples’ therapy to help us with our arguments. I never suggested this to Rosalind because of the picture I have in my mind; an unattractive older woman in glasses, perched like a wizened spider behind a mahogany desk with a brass nameplate and a ridiculous hourly rate, using words like “communicate” and “compromise” while the leaves outside her window turn gold in the sun. I know in that situation I would be hopeless. “I *am* communicating,” I would say. “She’s not listening.” I avoided that woman behind the desk because I know what she would make me do: give in. I’m a speech teacher. I believe in the purity of words. I don’t give in to spin.

The next day, I sleepwalk through my patients. Rosalind’s black TV-lit eyes swim across my vision every time I try to focus or tune in. The side of my face gently stings. I zone out on one of my older patients, Marla, a stroke victim. “Sorry, Marla,” I say. “I don’t know where my head is today.”

“That’s all right, Doc.” She looks out the window, taking in the gleaming view of downtown, the noon sun leaping off the skyscrapers. “It’s all just rocks on fire, baby. It’s all just rocks on fire.”

Marianne, who notices everything, talks to me near the end of the day. “Dr. Amasa.” She uses my formal title, so I know she means business. “Is everything all right?”

I shrug. “Why wouldn’t I be?” I say this like we all do—faking calm over sarcasm—because we can’t help but clearly advertise our hurt feelings to anyone willing to take notice.

Marianne looks at me for a while, and in the moments she stands there she draws herself up subtly and becomes Dr. Attlesey, boss. “Dr. Amasa.” She lowers her voice and draws me aside, to the window. “Inara Cortez talked to me yesterday. She’s concerned about Cameron’s lack of progress. She says he still stumbles over basic words for food, clothing.” She leans against the window, and her face, a thin reflection in the glass, tightens. “They’re both frustrated. The father, especially, it seems.”

The mention of Cameron’s father brings to mind a violent, high-color vision of what I imagine to be his meaty, callused fist making slow-motion contact with Inara’s jaw. “I don’t give a damn what he thinks.”

Marianne’s eyes widen. “Dr. Amasa, please.”

“Come on, Marianne. Have you seen the bruises on that woman?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“What if it’s affecting Cameron? What if the reason he’s not doing better is because he’s being traumatized at home?” As soon as I say this, my mind leaps on it, shaping it into a sickeningly satisfying theory. *It has nothing to do with me. It’s that abusive bastard, undoing everything Cameron accomplishes with a punch here, a backhand there.*

“Ben. You don’t know what happened to her. She could have had an accident.”

This is the rational Dr. Attlesey, the boss who has to say what is appropriate and logical and best for her practice. She steps closer to me. She lowers her voice more, but the effect is

menacing. “If you have such a personal issue with the family, I can reassign Cameron to a different therapist.”

I don’t want that. I fought to have Cameron, desperate to prove myself during my internship. The thought of failing Cameron, of failing my first real challenge as a therapist, feels worse than Rosalind’s phantom slap on my jaw, or her dark eyes, devoid of sympathy. “No. I’m sorry.”

“Good.” Marianne walks away, then stops and turns around. “Ben, I’m worried about you. The past few days you’ve been acting distracted, short-tempered—completely unfocused.” She takes a deep breath, as if steeling herself up to do something difficult but necessary, like reaching into freezing water to haul out someone who’s drowning. “I don’t know what’s going on with you, but if you continue to allow personal matters to color your performance in this office and with your patients, it’s going to affect my evaluation of your internship. Is that clear?”

She leaves me standing there without waiting for me to answer, as if she’s afraid of what I might say.

The next day, rain barricades us all inside during our lunch hour. I spend lunch ignoring a soggy sandwich on my desk and getting a little extra time in with Cameron before he leaves to go back to his regular school, but he seems to have forgotten even more of what he’s learned in the past month. He’s not even trying. I point to the simplest object on the table, the red ball, and he says “bounce—it bounces.”

I sigh.

Suddenly Rosalind is there. “Dr. Amasa, hard at work.” She springs up, sheathed in a simple black dress, engulfed in a red raincoat. “Hey, kiddo,” she says in Cameron’s general

direction, turning on a full-watt smile without really looking at him. When Cameron doesn't say anything back—he stays focused on the ball, darting a look at Rosalind out of the corner of his eye—she laughs and nudges me. “He must learn his conversational skills from you.”

It's almost an insult to my skills as a therapist, but not quite. “Haha,” I say without amusement. “What are you doing here?” Rosalind and I have not had sex, which means we have not made up, the pressure of that light slap still built up in both of us and unreleased. Still, she seems calm and nonconfrontational. Seeing her there, in the office, feels criminal. Does she notice that there's not a picture of her on my desk? I haven't had time, in the few days since we got back together, to dredge it up from the box of Rosalind-stuff that sits far back on the top shelf of my closet. That picture used to sit by the nightstand, before I got this job, and when I did get the job I was almost tempted to put the picture on my desk anyway, just so it looked like I had someone.

Rosalind picks up one of the recognition objects from my desk—the stuffed, one-eyed bear. “I thought I could pull you away for lunch, but it looks like you're busy.” She holds the bear up. “Playtime?” In the harsh light of the office, she looks pale and washed-out, a mere outline of her self.

Cameron is still not looking at either of us. I clear my throat. “Object recognition. Matching words to things.” I pick up another of the objects, a battered children's book. “A lot of kids—like Cameron here—are very smart, but they have a hard time summoning up the exact words for something.”

“That's a funny way of putting it,” Rosalind says. “Exact words.”

“Well, you know.” I point at a pair of safety shears—“Scissors”—then at the stuffed animal—“bear.”

Rosalind blinks. She holds the bear right in front of my face, then says slow and clear like a teacher spelling something out for an unruly child, “Toy.”

I don’t like being corrected in any circumstance, much less about my own job. I take the bear from her. “No, it’s a bear. *Toy* is its abstract category.”

Cameron shifts in his seat, but I ignore him—Rosalind’s challenge hooks me, makes me feel like one of those attack dogs you see on reality TV, hackles raised.

Rosalind smiles, in that sly way she has when she’s decided that I’m being completely unreasonable and illogical and she’s about to call me on it. She’s almost licking her lips. “But it’s not a bear. It’s just a doll made of cloth and stuffing. What if one of your patients calls it a toy? Or a stuffed animal? Is that wrong?”

I answer without thinking. “Of course.”

She snorts.

I clench my teeth. “I mean, the point is to try and get them to communicate the main idea of the object without hesitation. Yes, it’s just a stuffed animal, but it evokes the word ‘bear’ when you see it, because that’s what it’s representing to the patient.”

“But it’s subjective.”

“It’s *not* subjective. It’s therapy. You have to have parameters for the patient to follow or they’ll never improve.”

There are times when you say something to someone you love, a statement that you think is so obvious and intrinsic to the beliefs of your life that there is no possible way that the person could misunderstand or disagree with them. Rosalind looks at me blankly, though, as if I’m speaking an alien language, then turns around and leaves.

For a second I think about going after her—whether to apologize or to continue the argument, I don’t know—but Cameron, with a cough, brings me back. I take a few seconds

to calm down—breathe in, clear my mind—then sit down, sigh, and once again point to the ball.

He forms his mouth around the letter “b,” then swallows it and says “red?” with the upturn of a question in his face. I look at him, and he’s looking up at me with a wide open expression, like I can see through his pupils down into his body. It occurs to me for the first time that he looks up to me, that he wants to please me, to do well. It’s annoying. He can’t even say “ball.” I pick up the ball; I grab his shoulder and put the ball right in front of his face, under his nose, like someone shoving a dog’s nose into shit. “Ball.” I say, loud, right into his ear. “Ball ball ball ball.”

Confused, he reaches for the stuffed bear.

I slap his hand away.

The slap echoes forever in the lofty, fluorescent-lit stretch of the office. Cameron snatches his hand away, stands and takes two steps backwards away from me. His arm hangs limp at his side, as if my slap paralyzed it. He doesn’t cry—there’s something beyond tears in his eyes, dark like Rosalind’s, like his mother’s, something roiling and thunderous and beyond anger. One of the other therapists, Cindy, looks over at us. Her patient, a teenage girl, follows her gaze. They didn’t see what happened, but they know something’s up. An ice-thin layer of shock still holds me, but shame and remorse trickle in under it. I step toward Cameron, holding out my hand to him. “I’m sor—”

Calmly, slowly, he walks away from me and goes into the play room.

I’m at my desk when Inara comes to pick Cameron up. I glance over; I can’t be sure from across the office, but his face is glum and sad, and when she leans in, obviously to ask him what’s wrong, he dissolves into tears and points in my direction. Inara stands up, glares

in my direction, and stalks over. I stand up to meet her. Her nostrils are wide and dark, flared like a charging bull. “Now, let me explain—”

The slap is a hard one, the movie star kind that snaps your head around. It puts Rosalind’s light-hearted smack to shame. Before I can even orient myself, raise a hand to my cheek to feel the red heat stinging there, she’s walking away, grabbing her son and pulling him out.

When Marianne sits me down in her office and asks me to explain myself, I can’t think of anything but the stung heat on my face. “She didn’t even say anything. She just slapped me and walked away.” Is that the only language she knows? I wonder. I think about the alphabet of bruises on her body. Is this the way she wishes to communicate, like an animal?

That night, Rosalind buzzes me in. The apartment door is unlocked. She’s turned all the lights off except for a single lamp by the window. She prefers her evenings to be dark, to combat the gleam and fluorescent lighting of her day. She would light candles if she could stand the smell of fire. She sits by the window, under that single lamp, reading a magazine. She has already taken off her makeup for the night. There is a bag of Chinese food on the counter, big enough for two.

I put my things down in their customary place, where I used to put them when I was still a student lugging around a bag full of books and papers. I take the Chinese and sit in the chair next to her by the window. The TV is on but muted, on a gameshow. Rosalind looks up every now and then to check its progress. I know that she’s waiting for a rerun of a favorite old sitcom to come on, one of those with the cranky husband and the crackpot wife. I know the signs to read of her. Outside the window, there are lights below. All around is

black glass. You can see the skyline from Hieros Street, but here in downtown itself, you'd never know it was a city looking from a second floor apartment, couldn't match the word to its true state.

Rosalind declines food, so I eat silently and alone. I want to tell her what happened, but instead I find myself telling her what I wanted to tell her last week, what I intended to say on the riverbank but let myself chicken out of.

"Rosalind," I say, "do you remember that time I almost hit you? Right before we broke up?"

She's quiet for a long time, and completely still. Then she exhales heavily through her nose. "No. No, I don't remember that at all." She sounds completely unlike herself, her voice small and fractured, limping out of her, wounded. "Why?"

"A patient's mother slapped me today," I offer. This is a lead-in, to tell her I'm on suspension from the office for two weeks while I go to anger management classes.

Rosalind doesn't look surprised.

"I was a jerk to her kid."

Rosalind smiles. Without her lipstick, her lips seem pale and bloodless, like she's deeply cold, even though I know from experience that inside she's nothing but heat. "Did he call you a jerk? Did he name you that?"

I wonder. I wonder what Cameron said to his mom, how he put it, that pushed her over the edge and winged her, arm hard and ready to strike, in my direction. Sometimes I think that kids like Cameron make up for not being able to say what they mean by being extra observant, training themselves to see into and beyond things that most people take for granted because they can glibly identify every surface they touch. If Cameron saw me and Rosalind sitting there by the window, lit by lamp and moon and silent screen, what name

would he give to us? Love? Anger? Two proud dark-haired strangers with sharp eyes,
straining toward and away from each other in the stillness? Or would he see the hole
between us, a vast black rim of no apology that both of us circle, both of us drawn in?

CHAPTER FIVE: THE PILL WOMAN

In April—the semester winding to a close and the gleam of Paris’s lamps shuttered behind a grey curtain of rain—Isabel met her professor, Alan, for a late dinner. They had been seeing each other secretly for four months—dinner and lively arguments about Murzweill’s influence on the *bildungsroman* during the week, sleeping together all weekend. The restaurant was a small dark place in Montmartre; Isabel thought she could smell the ghost of absinthe and disease over the steak. During dinner, Alan spoke about his theory of the lost child, “the miscarriage” of barren mothers in fairy tales, losing their children to witches, stepmothers, Rumpelstilzkins. He related his theory and wiped his broad bearded mouth with a tiny white napkin. He smiled at her. Isabel felt something hard within her go soft, and with it the words frozen in place under her ribs thawed and rose to the surface. “I lost a child when I was young.”

She didn’t go into the details: pregnant at fifteen by a seventeen-year-old boyfriend; the morning she woke up and he was gone; the pain, the emptying out. She saw him years later in a friend’s Christmas card, his arm draped around a bony blonde woman taller than he was. A child-shaped mass of blankets rested in the crook of the woman’s arm. “The long and short of it,” Isabel said, using an American phrase she picked up from Alan, “is that I should be okay if I ever try again. So the doctor said.” She swallowed. “But it was so terrible. I’ve just never *wanted* to try again.” Between them—in her touch, in his smile—rested an unspoken “until now.”

A week later, Alan asked her to marry him. A ring burned cold and bright in his outstretched hand.

They decided to honeymoon in Germany, in a tiny village named Cochem, on the edge of the Black Forest. It was Alan's idea: "It's my favorite place in the world," he told her on the train. "I want to share it with you." He squeezed her hand. "Lots of memories."

Isabel squeezed his fingers back. She fell asleep resting her forehead on the window, still holding his hand. In her bag was her wedding ring—she felt uncomfortable wearing it while traveling—and a large package of condoms. She didn't take birth control, and despite what she'd intimated to Alan, she didn't think she was ready to go through the idea of a child again, the possibility and the violent, draining disappointment.

The first morning, Isabel woke warm and languid in their room at the local inn—"the bridal suite," the proprietor had promised, although the room was small and simply decorated. She dozed as Alan showered and shaved. "I'm going out for a moment," he announced. "To get a paper. I'll be back soon."

Isabel pushed back the sheets. "I'll come with you. Just let me get dressed." She shivered as the cool air of their room washed over her naked skin.

"That's all right," he said. "Why don't you have a bath, eat some breakfast?" He gestured to the tray laden with coffee and strudel. A second later, he was out the door.

An hour and a half passed, and Alan did not return. Isabel went downstairs with her coffee cup. The inn's concierge said Dr. Frobisher left some time before and had not returned.

"I see." Isabel turned and looked out the inn's front door. Someone had propped it open to let in the cool, clean spring air. "Did he ask for a paper?"

“No, Mrs. Frobisher.” The concierge seemed puzzled. “Would you like a paper? I’m afraid our only papers are from the local German towns, and of course the village paper. Nothing from France or America.”

“No, thank you.” She tried not to frown.

A shadow slanted into the door, and suddenly he was there, as if she had called him up out of thin air. He wore a brown coat to protect against the spring chill, and his eyes were wild and bright. He was smiling; when he saw Isabel, a white cup of coffee cradled like a bird between her small hands, he stopped. “Hello,” he said lightly, then took a tentative step inside. “You startled me. I thought you’d still be dozing.”

“It’s been two hours.” Isabel tried to keep accusation out of her voice. She spoke in French so her words seemed lighter than what she actually felt, which was suspicion and annoyance. “Where were you? There aren’t any papers except German ones, and they have those here at the desk.” She was very aware they were standing in the entryway of the inn, where the concierge and the other guests could hear. They spoke in French, but anyone could read signs of body language, volume, facial expression.

“I went for a walk,” Alan said. “You were still in bed when I left and it’s early yet. Not even ten.” He moved closer to her and rubbed his beard. “You’re not mad. I just went for a walk, got some fresh air. I found some really great places we need to go see.”

Isabel didn’t say anything, then nodded once. Something that had hardened briefly in the air between them deflated and folded in on itself.

They spent the day outdoors, hiking around the village and through the dense dark trees of the Black Forest. Alan told Isabel stories about coming to Cochem and other villages to study local history and oral tradition, especially the Grimms’ stories, for his dissertation. They bought lunch before leaving the village and ate it on a flat white rock by a

river. Children played in the water downstream, supervised by a tired-looking older woman. Alan told Isabel about the time that he got lost in the woods and stumbled on a ruined cottage. It was built to childlike specifications, no more than a skeleton of mortar and stone. Whatever roof it possessed had fallen to time and rain. He slept a night there, huddled in a corner with his head pillowed on his jacket, and when morning came he felt a dream slip from him, a parade of small bearded men, midgets hidden away from the rest of the world, and in their midst, a prepubescent girl with hair darker than jet.

Isabel wondered how much of the story was true—Alan loved to embellish, even in his lectures—but it captivated her all the same. Every man she'd dated since she was a teenager, she let fall away from her, unwilling to give in completely only to have them desert her like her first boyfriend and her first child. With Alan, though, she'd been careful. She felt protected by him; his age and wisdom put her at ease. She stretched their relationship over the semester, wanting to be sure. By the time he put a ring on her finger, she trusted him completely, sure that he would never leave her. She reached out and touched his cheek. His beard felt soft and scratchy under her palm—she remembered it rubbing both silken and rough against the inside of her thighs the previous night—and would have made love to him right on the rock but for the laughing children not twenty feet away.

The next morning, Isabel woke and Alan was not there at all. It was seven a.m. She sat still for a moment with the bedside lamp on, adjusting, waking. Morning light had not grown strong yet. She went to see if he was in the bathroom, and then noticed the note tacked to the door of their room.

Gone out for a walk. Will be back soon. Go back to sleep. Love, A.

Isabel did not consider herself a jealous person, but this second disappearance, for the second morning in a row, made her imagine a beautiful German woman, fair where Isabel was dark, a stonemason's wife like something out of Grimms' with an enchanted voice and evil blue eyes, available for morning trysts in the woods. Alan had spent years in and around Cochem. It wasn't crazy to imagine he'd had a few brief flings with local girls. Sometimes, she knew, he just wanted to be alone, particularly in a place like Cochem where his academic passion and the physical world connected so tightly. Still, she could not shake the picture of the German woman from her mind. The images came unbidden, his lithe body bent over her. Jealousy coiled in her chest and throbbed like a second heart.

Isabel dressed without bathing. She put her dark hair up in a sloppy ponytail, then went downstairs.

"I don't know where he is," the concierge said. "You might try the café down the street. It is popular with tourists. Perhaps your husband is doing some sightseeing."

Isabel ignored the anger that spiked through her at that suggestion. She refused to believe that Alan would go off without her, without even telling her where he was going or asking if she wanted to come along. They were married now. He had always been the picture of courtesy and consideration. "Perhaps," she said. "Thank you." Then she stepped out into the morning.

Cochem loomed on all sides, tall grey buildings of timber and stone filled with modern lighting. Glimpses of green and black flashed from every corner; the surrounding forest showed its face over the tops of roofs and between walls, a reminder of what truly claimed that space. Morning seeped slow and cold through the sky. Isabel could see her breath. Villagers crowded the street, talking loudly and opening their shops for the day.

The café was crowded, even though it was early on Saturday morning. A group of older women filled one corner of the room, shouting and laughing. Isabel shied away from them as she looked around. Alan was tall and bearded and stood out among Frenchmen, but every man in Cochem seemed similarly sized and bearded.

“What are you looking for, miss?” The waiter tossed down his rag and spoke in rural, thickly-accented German that she had a hard time grasping. He was blond and handsome. Deep acne scars marked one side of his face.

Isabel cleared her throat. “I am looking for my husband. He’s American. He’s a big man. Bearded. Have you seen him?”

The waiter narrowed his blue eyes. “Yes, we know the American. He came by asking about a woman.”

He asked about a woman. The blonde siren from her daydream flashed back into Isabel’s mind. “What woman?”

The waiter gestured towards the door of the cafe. “She lives out in the forest. Witch girl, knows medicines and things. Lots of folk around here go to her for small things, rather than go into Schlossburg to the doctor. She is a friend of his. From before.”

Isabel certainly realized that in the years of Alan’s visits he’d probably had a handful of German girls in his bed. He was charismatic and handsome and spent weeks a time in the various villages. The abstract realization of this fact did not bother her. To have the possibility laid out plainly in front of her made her want to slide to the floor.

“Out in the forest?” she asked, and the waiter nodded. The look on his face was pleasantly blank, as if he’d just announced the weather to a neighbor.

Someone came into the cafe, and Isabel knew even as she turned around that it was Alan. He had a way of entering a room, of pushing his presence in ahead of him like an announcement or a warning.

“Isabel.” He said her name with relief. She turned and saw him standing there, large and dark with the morning sun outlining him from behind. He took a step into the cafe, then stopped as he saw the waiter hovering by her. “Isabel,” he said again, but he was looking at the waiter. “I went back to the inn and you were gone. The concierge told me he directed you to the cafe.” Alan ran a hand through his hair. It was wild and unkempt, as if he hadn’t bothered to brush or wash it on waking. “Didn’t you see my note?”

The waiter disappeared, answering the loud beckons of a huge old man at the other end of the counter. Isabel cleared her throat. The words that fought to leap out of her mouth were “where were you?” or, slightly more melodramatic, “who is she?” but she was very aware of all the people around.

“I didn’t want to wait for you,” she said calmly.

Alan stared at her, then at the waiter. “What did he say to you?”

“What makes you think he said something to me?”

“Because of the look on your face.”

Isabel was taken aback by his tone, commanding and unkind. “Well. You’re a Black Forest institution, it seems.”

A plate dropped and smashed on the floor. The group of old women in the corner applauded. The busboy who dropped it tipped his cap at them. Alan looked away. As Isabel watched, the intensity went out of him like air. “Come over here,” he said, touching her arm and pointing to an empty table by the door, removed from the other customers.

At the table, Alan cleared his throat. “You realize,” he said, speaking in French in a low voice, “that by doing what I do here—studying, collecting stories, etc.—I don’t make a lot of friends.” He glanced up at the German villagers all around. “The people of the cities, Berlin, whatever—they’re very different from these villagers. These people don’t like outsiders getting in their business. They don’t like me very much.”

Isabel listened while looking down at an old ring stain of coffee on the table. She traced its arc with her finger as he spoke. “Then why did we come here?”

Alan smiled. “Because—despite the people—it’s my favorite place in the entire world. This is the birthplace of fairy tales. I wanted you to see it.” He scratched his beard. “I’m sorry about this morning. I just like to go out for walks by myself sometimes, you know that. I visit with people, people I know from other times I’ve visited. I don’t want to bore you.”

Isabel dragged her nail across the table, leaving a faint white furrow in the grimy wood. “The waiter said you were looking for a girl.” She looked up at him.

Alan looked over at the waiter. “He lied to you. I told you, I went to see a friend. Old man Schmidt.” He reached across the table and touched her hand. “Do you believe me?”

Isabel looked down at his big hand, brown and laced with thick veins. It covered hers completely. She wasn’t sure if she believed him, but she felt as if she had no choice but to do so. She nodded.

Together, they left the café and walked back to the inn.

Isabel woke at three a.m. the next morning and could not go back to sleep. She replayed what the waiter said to her—was it true? Why would he lie? Did the villagers really

dislike Alan so much as to make up stories about him? The light outside the window lifted from deep blue and black into shades of purple and grey.

Alan's digital watch beeped softly: an alarm, with the volume turned down. Isabel pretended to be asleep. Alan woke up, leaned over to make sure her eyes were closed, then got up and dressed. Isabel waited until he was out of the door before she leapt up and dressed herself.

The concierge wasn't at his desk when she went downstairs. She made sure Alan wasn't lurking in the common room, then stepped outside.

The morning was grey and lavender and cold. Faint patches of fog clung to everything. Alan was several feet away, walking quickly away from the inn, down the village's main road. His footfalls echoed back to her on the stone. Isabel pulled her jacket tightly around her body and hurried after him, following from a distance.

The adults she'd known throughout her childhood and adolescence in Paris carried on with affairs and secret sexual obsessions; there was an attitude about it that perhaps was a part of being French, a cavalier acceptance of the body's appetites. Her own mother had made no secret about frequently spending time alone with a younger co-worker, and her father had never raised a hand or his head in question, at least in the presence of their daughter. Isabel couldn't help it, though. The memory of Alan's warmth over her the first night in the inn, his own fire licking hard at the cold iron of her spine, her thighs, her arms, felt like hers. She was his wife. They had spoken words of law in the presence of witnesses. She wanted that fire to herself.

She followed Alan down a side road. At the edge of the village, the pavement faltered and disappeared. The buildings and fences stopped completely and the trees began.

Alan walked on, leaving the village proper. He crossed a wooden bridge, then turned off the path and was lost from sight.

She followed, hurrying but taking care to be quiet. The woods filled with morning noise. Birds hopped from branch to branch, preparing to sing. The trees rustled, full of sweet breeze. Everything around seemed poised, full of breath, teetering on the edge of exhalation. Isabel hurried across the bridge and almost missed the small, dark path leading off the road into the woods, marked by a single wooden sign post pointing down the path to a village whose name she did not recognize.

Alan was nowhere to be seen. The forest path was packed with dry mud and straw, strewn with a few green leaves and the first sprinkling of flowers. It was wide enough for a single car to pass down, though it didn't appear to be much used. It was colder there; the trees grew over the path so the dim light of the new morning disappeared into cool, rustling darkness. Isabel hurried, hurried. The sky, the dawn, the village—everything vanished, and she began to feel afraid. Something in the brush started and skittered away at her approach. Her heart pumped wildly in her chest. She could feel it throughout her body, as if her entire frame was vibrating in time.

She didn't realize it was a house at first. From a distance it was nothing but a strange darkness in the foliage. Then a sharp bend in the path revealed it, on the bank of a creek, tiny and dilapidated. The roof was modern but the structure itself looked very old. There was no sign of Alan. Isabel stopped and hid behind a tree, watching the house.

She was unsure, now that she was here, what she wanted to do. Knocking on the door and confronting what she found seemed potential for embarrassment rather than discovery. What would she find? Most likely nothing more than a young girl getting ready to walk to work in whichever of the local villages employed her. To find her husband here,

in this place, at this time, in the lightless void of the woods, seemed ludicrous. He was a man of the book and lamp. He craved society. Why come here, to this woman? Standing in the path, the house before and the wood behind, Isabel felt ashamed, because it was easier than being terrified.

The cottage door opened. Soft voices floated toward her. One of them—gruff, accented German—was her husband's. Isabel held her breath and stayed hidden as Alan left the cottage and set off up the path, back to the village. She felt him pass: a change in the air, a pocket of pressure moving implacably through. All her intentions of confrontation, all her anger, her green possessiveness, condensed and crystallized, a hard diamond in her gut. He was there. He came out of the girl's house. Then he was gone, down the path and out of sight.

Isabel turned. She was quite alone, she and the house and its owner. She left her hiding place, marched through the overgrown yard up to the front door, and knocked.

She waited a long time, listened at the door, but heard no movement within. She knocked again, eager for the confrontation, afraid to lose her nerve.

The door opened with no warning, no telltale rustle or noise, as if the inhabitant had been waiting just on the other side the whole time, leaning against the door and feeling Isabel's knocks vibrate through the timber. She was older than Isabel—still fairly young and pretty, but lines had begun to crack their way across her face. She looked very much like Isabel, thin and dark. She only opened the door a crack, and through the narrow space she asked "Who are you?"

Isabel folded her arms. The words she cocked and aimed were "I am Dr. Alan Frobisher's wife. Isabel. Isabel Frobisher" but instead, silence came flinging out. She

wanted to slap the woman in the face and watch her bruised reaction but her arm would not lift, not then, standing on the threshold, being watched from a narrow strip of darkness.

The woman opened the door a bit more. “Who sent you here?”

This, Isabel could answer, and she did, shoving words into the awkward silence, levering it aside. “The waiter.” She turned and pointed. “In Cochem.”

A baby cried within the house. The woman muttered something soft and unintelligible in German, then opened the door. “Come in,” she said. “I haven’t got much time. You’ll have to wait a moment while I check on the baby.” She closed the door behind Isabel and gestured to a worn couch by the door. Isabel took her seat and watched the woman disappear into the back of the house, towards the sound of the crying.

The house was messy and modern, not what she expected from the exterior. A small but otherwise new-looking television sat on a table across from her. The small living room was littered with books and piles of wrinkled clothes. The place smelled of something herbal, strong but pleasant. It reminded Isabel of the cabins for rent in southern France, rustic on the outside but wired with electricity, cable, sometimes Internet. *We’re all hermit crabs*, she thought, *crawling into venerable old shells and setting up new, shining house*.

The woman reappeared with a baby in her arms. Isabel was no expert, but her first thought was that it was definitely the woman’s child—it had something of her eyes, a whorl of dark hair on its head. Her second thought was that it was not a newborn. It looked at things, and it saw. There was purpose in its grasping. The woman placed it in a brightly-colored playpen where it looked around with interest, focusing on Isabel and breaking into a toothless smile. She winced, then forced herself to smile back. Emptiness—hunger, or memory—throbbed deep down inside her, and she put a hand over her belly.

Satisfied that the child was seen to, the woman turned to Isabel. “How long have you been pregnant?”

Isabel was taken aback. “Uh...” The emptiness throbbed again, as if a space within her tried to contract and embrace something that was no longer there. She couldn’t answer the woman. A memory of being pregnant pushed all her words aside: sitting on an ugly green couch in her mother’s house, watching an American television show about young adults who wasted their lives talking about nonsense in a coffee shop, when suddenly a craving for artichoke hearts, which she usually hated, spiralled up from her womb and filled her throat and mouth. There was room for nothing else. Her body would have nothing else.

The woman waved a hand. “Morning after? I understand.” She motioned for Isabel to follow her. Isabel removed her hand from her stomach and complied. They moved into another part of the house; the room was dark, and smelled more strongly of the pungent, earthy odor that laced the living room. Isabel peered into the dimness.

The woman switched on a light— red light. Isabel expected to see chemical baths and photo trays, but instead saw tables and shelves full of old-fashioned glass jars stuffed with various roots and viscous liquids. One wall was taken up by shelves of pills in clear orange bottles.

The woman noticed Isabel looking at the shelves of pills, and made a sharp noise in the back of her throat. “What I get on the black market, I use for the local villagers. My contact is very discreet, doesn’t price gouge me.” She pulled pills off a high shelf, talking with her back to Isabel. “Most people around here, natural things help them best. Sometimes, though, the pills are necessary, and locals don’t have the best luck with the German medical system. You see one old woman die because she couldn’t get approved for

her antibiotics, and, well.” She turned around, looked right at Isabel. “I say this because I know you’re not from around here. I don’t want you telling the wrong thing to the wrong people. I help you, you keep quiet.” She handed Isabel a small bottle containing a few pills. “There. Take those, soon. Any chance of a child will pass.”

Something in the way she said that—“child will pass,” as if it were a stone—chilled Isabel through. She felt as if the morning’s weight of cold that pressed in on her jacket and her skin suddenly sank into her, pushed right in. She felt pregnant with it. “Morning after...” She hadn’t understood what the woman meant. Now it felt dangerously clear, transparent, even, as if with the right light behind her she would be seen through. She thought about explaining, telling the woman that this was a mistake, that she’d misunderstood Isabel’s reason for coming. A wild sadness that she hadn’t felt in years, that animal, restless panic that had taken over her after she lost her child, shouldered aside thoughts of Alan and his presence at the cottage. She wanted to be away from there; she gripped the bottle tight and followed the woman out into the living room.

The woman entered a few things in a big black ledger. As she wrote, the baby barked, sharp and joyous, and threw a stuffed elephant out of his playpen. A thought occurred to Isabel. An image: Alan, seen from the back, his large frame filling the woman’s doorway. *She is a friend of his. From before.* “Whose child is that?” she asked. Silence. Then, sharply, “Mine. Why?” The woman looked up from the ledger. Her eyes were hard and black. The only sound was the baby, gurgling and drooling onto a faded yellow blanket.

Isabel tightened her fingers around the bottle and said, “I’m Dr. Alan Frobisher’s wife. We’re here on our honeymoon.”

The woman’s hard look did not disappear but something behind it changed—retreated or formed up, Isabel couldn’t tell, but different, even though everything looked the

same. The woman closed the supply ledger and went to pick up the baby. She faced Isabel with the child in her arms and said, “I don’t think you’re a customer at all. Please leave my house.”

It was a command if she ever heard one—her voice vibrated with something primal, the ring of steel on steel. Something animal leapt up in Isabel, an answering iron, a fury, but instead of riding it like a wave towards the woman and towards the truth, she turned and left the house, did not close the door, beat back up the path, over the bridge and did not look back or go back even when she realized she still had the small bottle in her hand. In the light, the pills were a deep, deep red.

Hours later, back at the inn with Alan, Isabel woke warm and half-dressed under the blankets. Night had fallen. Outside the window, lamplight sprinkled through the town. Somewhere close by, a boombox blared German industrial rock. The thump of the bass gently vibrated through the wall. Beyond that, someone played an accordion. Isabel smelled beer and roasting meat through the open window. With the disappearance of the sun, it had grown cold again. Alan sat next to her in bed, reading. He wore only a thin pair of pajama pants. Hair covered his bare chest; his nipples were hard and dark in the cool air. When he felt her stir, he put his book down and took her in his arms. Isabel was half-asleep, and she turned instinctively to the warmth of his body wrapping around her, tilted her head up by reflex to find the soft, scratchy warmth of his bearded mouth. After, snuggled around her nakedness, he smiled against her ear. “You know, it’s okay if you don’t want to have any children. I would love to have a family with you, but I wouldn’t want to put you through another miscarriage.” He ran a hand up her thigh and over her belly. “I’m okay with just us.”

Clarity rushed back into her, white and cold in the wake of her orgasm, tidewater pulling back to reveal frozen sand. Alan nuzzled her neck; she patted him and extricated herself from his arms, from the bed, and went into the bathroom.

Her naked body shone white and large in the mirror, the tiny bathroom making her seem larger by comparison, as if she filled up the space. The industrial beats and accordion were more muted from in here, a ghostly sound. The tile felt cold under her feet. The jeans she wore that morning lay on the floor; the shape of a pill bottle bulged in the front pocket. In the mirror, she saw Alan dozing in the bed behind her—hair mussed, mouth curved in a warm, sated smile—and beyond him, the open window.

She could confront him. Tell him what she saw from behind the tree, what she saw in the pill woman's house. Of course, she had no proof. He could deny it easily—"she's just a friend, the baby belongs to someone else." The only thing she had was the pill woman's hostile reaction to her and her own gut feeling that the baby was Alan's, that part of the reason he had insisted on coming to Cochem was to visit his child. Even this might have been enough. With enough arguing, she might have gotten him to confess. But his image, naked and happy in her bed—*their* bed—filled the bathroom mirror. He chose her; he married her. In a few days they would leave Cochem and probably never return. Alan wanted to take her back to America. He was okay with "just us." Just them.

But the pill woman's house would always be there, deep in the dark woods.

Casually, so as not to draw Alan's attention, Isabel squatted and pulled the pill bottle out of her jeans. She dumped the entire bottle into the toilet, then flushed it.

"Isabel?" Alan propped himself up on one hand, peering into the bathroom.
"Everything okay?"

She waited until the last pill disappeared down the drain, then tossed the empty pill bottle in the garbage and walked back into the bedroom. “Everything’s fine.” She slid one knee onto the bed. Alan started to move over and make room for her, but she swiftly lifted herself over him, straddling his waist. The sheet slipped down around his thighs. “What are you doing?” he said, needlessly, a smile in his voice. Isabel silenced him with a hard kiss. A few moments passed in silence, the wetness of their mouths, and then Alan rubbed his erection insistently against her. He moaned and broke away from the kiss, then reached over to the bedside table for a condom.

Isabel grabbed his arm, her white hand cold on his wrist, and pulled him away from them. “No need.” She kissed him again.

“Are you sure? You said—”

“I know what I said. I want to try.”

For a moment Isabel thought he was going to refuse. Frustrated, feeling her chance to triumph slip away, she moved against him, sliding gently onto him, further and further, and he grabbed her hips in his strong hands, trying to stop her—“Isabel, *wait!*”—but she ignored him, continued until yes, there, they were making love, and Alan’s resistance melted away, left him as her child had left her, his doubts and his thoughts—the pill woman and her dark-headed child—miscarrying out of him and away. Isabel held onto his shoulders and drained him of everything but his lust and, yes, she thought, love. He loves me. He chose *me*. And the music from outside briefly swelled then disappeared entirely, leaving the brief flutter of human voices in its wake.

CHAPTER SIX: THE BEAR HOUSE

The house emerged out of the underbrush like a monster lifting its dark head from a thicket, scenting intruders. “There it is,” said Jonathan. He planted his feet and pointed, triumphant, one hand latched onto his stuffed rabbit’s ear. “I told you so. The bear house.” His voice sounded thin and stretched in the vast quiet of the woods. It reminded Hannah of a story Jonathan asked her to read him whenever she babysat him, about a girl who follows a kid’s voice into the woods, but when she finds him it’s not a kid at all but a tricky monster who eats the girl up. Hannah liked the story. Sometimes Jonathan and she sat on the back porch of her house, where she slept, and read stories to each other for hours, cooling off under the two fans and drinking Kool Aid. Inside, Hannah’s mom watched do-it-yourself television shows—home renovation and wedding makeovers—and fought with Hannah’s dad while he packed his stuff in boxes.

“Does your mom read you these stories?” Hannah asked Jonathan once. They all seemed too gruesome for an eight-year-old. The book itself, which Jonathan brought with him everyday—along with the stuffed rabbit, whose name was Commander— was thick and old with a flaking black cover and no pictures. Jonathan blinked and said “It was my dad’s,” and Hannah didn’t ask anymore about it. His dad had died less than a year ago. Jonathan and his mom, Nikki, were her closest neighbors, though their house was almost a mile down the road. Hannah babysat Jonathan during the weekdays while his mom worked as a nurse in town.

The bear house—Jonathan’s name for it—looked like a true log cabin. Not the kind manufactured for tourists, but a real one: old, deserted, and completely out of repair. The

front window was missing half a pane of glass. A huge piece of scrap metal haphazardly fastened onto the edge of the cabin's roof hung over the front door, a makeshift porch cover. The porch itself—rickety planks of wood bending in on themselves, hardly looking fit to stand on—was punctured with holes and missing sections. The front doorway stood empty and open; a torn screen door covered in moss and animal feces leaned against the side of the cabin next to the porch. There was nothing remarkable about the cabin except the carvings that covered the outer walls, abstract shapes and designs that made no sense to Hannah. They looked as if they'd been gouged out of the wood by blunt instruments. If she looked at them out of the corner of her eye, they coalesced into a vague shape—picture? words?—but when she tried to focus more, the image slipped away. It looked to Hannah like the bear house hadn't been occupied for years, and she said so.

“But the bears come here,” Jonathan said. “I saw them. Last week. Didn't we, Commander?” He nodded the stuffed rabbit's head up and down. An old grape juice stain spread across one side of Commander's furry face like a birthmark.

Hannah didn't say anything—she didn't believe that Jonathan had actually seen bears, or that there were any bears around at all—but the cabin interested her, like something out of a rustic postcard. A thin blue haze hung over everything, but at 9:00 in the morning, Hannah knew it wasn't fog; the day before, there'd been a massive brush fire two counties over. A faint scent of fire hung in the air, like her backyard used to smell whenever Dad barbequed for his pool buddies and Mom wore a pink dress and served everyone red Kool-Aid from a huge plastic jug. But that was years ago. Now the old grill sat empty and alone a few feet from her back porch, charred and out of practice for years. Hannah imagined it reacting to all the smoke in the air with familiarity, as if in the blue ghost of fire it could smell and remember something of its own flame, the hot coals and barbeque sauce in

summer evenings where the air shimmered low and hot like music over the seared grass. But these images were ghosts, smoke drifting in from years before. Her parents had barely talked for two years. A few weeks ago, on Hannah's last day as a middle school student, they told her they were getting a divorce. Her dad was leaving at the end of the summer, as soon as he packed up all his stuff and fixed his car. Hannah, in response, took her radio and her magazines and collages-in-progress and a pillow and moved onto the back porch.

"What do you think it is?" Jonathan said. He reached out and ran a small, white hand over the rough wood of the house's wall. At seven years old, he was fearless, didn't hesitate. The black and violet shadows of the pines closed in thick as smoke around them, the air heavy with the day's heat, the haze of the brushfires, and the smell of sun-warmed sap and straw.

Hannah shrugged. "It's someone's house. Or it used to be. This probably used to be a hunter's retreat or something. Maybe before the city got built up." She ran her hand over the house's timber walls, worn from time and rain. A film of grime came away on her hand. She rubbed it on her shorts. "Anyway. No bears here today." Hannah reached out and tugged Jonathan's ear gently, a sign of affection that her dad frequently gave her.

"Doesn't look like there's been anybody here in years, really."

"No, they were here today. Look."

And he pointed to an empty windowsill where a small puddle of honey collected on the edge of the sill and dripped slowly off, the light catching it and turning it golden.

"What could it be?" Hannah asked her dad that night. She sat with him on the floor of her parents' tiny bedroom, helping him organize his books and put them neatly into boxes. She offered to help him pack after she got into a fight with her mom about sleeping

on the porch. The truth was that she didn't feel like being in the house with either of her parents since they told her that Dad was leaving and they were getting a divorce. She was too mad at her mom for messing things up—she was certain it was her mom's fault—and too hurt by her dad for wanting to leave. That's why, when they told her, she picked up her oscillating fan and her pillows and her small television and set up camp on the screened-in back porch, making a bed out of the weatherbeaten futon that smelled of insecticide.

“It's probably just what you said.” Hannah's dad was a little guy—at thirteen, she was almost as tall as he was—but he made up for that with a loud laugh and a dark goatee that made him look older, more sophisticated and sinister. He'd started growing the goatee two years ago, when he and Hannah's mom stopped talking to each other. Hannah never asked, and was never told, but she imagined the goatee having something to do with this, some outward sign of brewing trouble. He handed her a stack of dusty Michael Crichton novels. “Most likely it's a hunter's cottage. Blackchurch isn't an old city, and it wasn't as big as it is now until about twenty or thirty years ago. All the rich city guys probably had places on this end of the county for hunting, fishing, summer getaways, the works.”

“But what about the carvings?”

Dad shrugged. “Weird decorators' sense.”

Hannah stacked the Michael Crichton hardcovers in a brown box and folded the top closed. Before, her dad might have been intrigued by the mystery of the carvings. He loved books with a sense of menace, adventure, unknown secrets waiting to be unraveled. Now, he shrugged it away. She tried again. “Jonathan said he saw bears there.”

“Bears?” Her dad laughed and wiped his dusty hands on his jeans. “That kid's got an imagination. There aren't any bears around here, except for up in the Kennepaws.” He glanced at Hannah. “They used to come around your grandparents' old place in the spring.

Guess I'll have that to deal with next year." He laughed, easy and light, and turned back to the bookshelf, rummaging for another stack.

Hannah's curiosity and excitement about the bear house evaporated. Only one lamp illuminated the bedroom. The shadows of stacked boxes fell over them in layers. "You're really going, then?"

Her dad stopped moving, but didn't turn around. "Hannah, you know that I am." A sour rind of annoyance edged his voice. "It'll take me a few more days to get the Buick running, but after that, yes, I'm going."

Hannah shrank back at the sound of his voice. She didn't mean to keep bothering him about it, but she wanted badly to ask him not to leave even though she knew it was the most unfair thing for her to do. Her parents didn't want to be together anymore; they weren't happy. But thinking about being without him made her sad and a little afraid. She'd always liked him more than she liked her mom—Dad was caring and smart, while Mom had always seemed annoyed that she even had a kid. The thought of the house without him scared her: the insides suddenly feeling large and white and empty because all of his books and papers and knick knacks and clutter disappeared with him; the one hallway that ran through the house echoing; her bare feet slapping on the linoleum; and at the end of the hall her mom sat in the living room, eyes fixed on a television with no sound, ignoring the sharp echoing thwack thwack of Hannah's feet on the linoleum as she ran to, or away, from her.

They packed the rest of the books in silence. Her dad smiled at her once, to show that he wasn't mad. Hannah understood; he was ready to leave, and he was tired of talking about it. Hannah was ready to leave, too, but she'd only been able to go as far as the back porch. Sometimes she thought about asking him to take her with him—she was sure her mom would be happy to release her—but something always stopped her, something in his

voice or eyes whenever he talked about leaving. For the first time in several years, her dad looked happy, and it happened whenever he was talking about packing his things, moving up to the mountain, and being alone. She knew that he would miss her, but not enough to bring her along.

Mom looked in on them once. Hannah ignored her—her mom’s jeans and bare feet appeared in the doorway—but Dad glanced up, said nothing, and went back to packing. Mom hovered there for a moment, and Hannah wondered what she was thinking—anger? happiness?—but then the feet and the jeans moved quietly away and didn’t bother them again for the rest of the evening.

Hannah and Jonathan went to the bear house again the next day. For their trip into the woods, Hannah packed supplies: sandwiches, Kool-Aid in sippy cups, sunscreen, and a blanket for them to spread on the floor of the house. Jonathan played, tramping around the old shack with Commander and acting out various make-believe scenarios—parleying with bears, defending the house from wolf invasion—while Hannah sat on the blanket, drinking instant coffee that she brought in her own thermos. Every now and then, she walked around the house, stretching her legs. The brushfires had continued unabated, reaching into the edges of Clurken County; even in the early morning, thin wisps of smoke hung from the pine branches.

Hannah had a lot of theories about the house, her current favorite of which was that this was a leftover set from a film crew that shot a movie in Clurken County years ago, when it was still much cheaper than California backlots. She fantasized about cameramen and directors going back and forth, testing the light, while the actors—maybe in medieval dress, or rural outfits—sat outside the house and enjoyed the shade of the thick pines, which kept

out most of day's heat. Sometimes, around noon, when Hannah began to doze on the blanket, these images mixed nightmarishly with a vision of Jonathan's bears: bears running the camera, bears applying makeup to human actor faces. She preferred hanging out with Jonathan at the bear house to staying on the back porch—her mom had started finding things for Hannah to do around the house that she was too lazy to do herself. In the bear house, Hannah felt truly safe from everything that was going on at her own house, and for a little while, she forgot about it.

“How did you find this place?” she asked Jonathan.

“Easy as pie.” He walked out from one of the cabin's back rooms, Commander hoisted up onto his shoulder. “We're explorers.” The rabbit stared at Hannah through his plastic monocle. “The bears said it was okay to look around.”

“Jonathan, come on, there aren't any bears.”

“But what about the honey?” Jonathan pointed to the back window. Hannah remembered it, fresh and sticky like it had dripped off a greedy bear's chin as he devoured a comb. “They still live here. They're just out hunting.”

“I don't think bears live in houses, Jonathan.” She wished he'd drop it. She caught herself looking around, almost hoping to notice a shaggy hulk in the corner, a great paw pressed against the one window that still had all its glass.

“These bears are different.” Jonathan stood at the front door, looking out into the pine woods. “I bet they're close by.”

They hadn't gone further than the house, content to stay within its clear, safe confines. Hannah felt safe in the house, although sometimes the trek to get there—the closeness of the trunks, the lack of a path—made her chest tighten. Jonathan stood with his back to her, swaying back and forth from foot to foot as if about to take off running for the

trees. Her mind flashed forward, Jonathan darting white and small in and out of the pines, herself forced to go after him, trailing Commander by his ear, smaller and weaker even than Jonathan under the dark trees.

“Jonathan.” She pushed a little steel into her voice. “There’s no such thing as bears who live in houses. Bears live in caves and dens. Now, come help me set up for lunch.”

Jonathan stopped moving. He stood still for a moment, then turned around. He had a look on his face that Hannah had never seen. His face was puckered and red, like he was holding back tears so tightly they were welling up in his head and changing the contours of his face. “Don’t tell me there’s *no such thing*,” he yelled.

Then he turned and ran out into the woods. He disappeared among the trees, his footfalls, fading after him.

Hannah sat on the blanket, unable to move, thinking that Jonathan would come back in a second, a red scratch on his cheek and a smile on his lips, that he was just being funny, playing a joke. But then three minutes went by, Hannah sitting perfectly quiet, like a hunter in a deer blind, and Jonathan didn’t come back.

Panic surged up inside her. It reminded her of how she felt the night that she listened to her parents arguing for hours, and when she went downstairs the next morning, her mom sat her down and said “I’m divorcing your father. He’s leaving us to live somewhere else.” The same panic—it felt green and bitter and nauseating, like eating too many sour apple candies—roiled through Hannah then, and at first she thought she was going to be sick, but in a moment, sitting there at the table, looking at her mom’s blank face and her dad, composed but miserable across from her, the panic turned into a fierce hate, sour green shooting through the spectrum into streaky, poisonous black-red, and she turned and went upstairs and grabbed everything she could hold and moved onto the back porch,

as far away from her mom as she could get without leaving the house, which she would have done if she'd had anywhere to go. But this panic didn't give way or transform—if anything, it got worse as the seconds ticked by and Jonathan didn't reappear, maybe passing deeper and harder into the woods as she sat there, already lost and out of earshot, and she would have to go in after him, or worse, call the police, tell his mom that she had lost him.

Hannah grabbed Commander, hugged him to her chest as if he were her own, and ran outside to the edge of the clearing. Low-hanging branches brushed against her face, their needles green and pungent. “Jonathan!” she called out, but her voice cracked, riddled with fear. She took a deep breath and tried again. “Jonathan!” and that time it was a roar, deep and commanding. “Come back!”

Nothing answered her but a faint rustling of wind through the tops of the pines, dim light streaking through branches.

Then, a cough, a flash of a white shirt, and Jonathan materialized out of the trees, pine straw in his hair. He took Commander from Hannah's hands and walked past her without saying anything.

They packed up their things early. Usually they stayed in the clearing almost all day, but even the cheerful openness of the clearing around the house seemed strange and threatening to Hannah after Jonathan ran off. She knelt on the cabin floor and carefully shook out the blanket, folded it neatly across her chest. She placed everything back in their bag, one by one, as Jonathan handed them to her. Neither of them spoke.

Jonathan handed her the last thing, a half-empty bottle of sunscreen, and twisted one of Commander's ears. “I'm sorry I ran off.” Twist, twist. Then: “You're not going to tell my mom, are you?”

Hannah put the sunscreen bottle in the bag, then stood up and hoisted it over her shoulder. “No.” Looking down at him, she wasn’t sure what she felt: a residual thrill of fear from his running off; anger that he would take off and not do as asked. But sitting there on the cabin floor with his stuffed rabbit, he looked very small and afraid. Hannah helped him up, and they headed back for the house.

They walked in silence for a while. Hannah led the way, pushing through low-hanging branches and holding them out of Jonathan’s way. “Thank you,” he said. Then, after a moment: “My mom always tells me there’s no such thing. Whenever I tell her that Commander can talk, or that there are bears in the woods, or that mermaids really exist and stuff.” He hefted Commander and tucked him more securely under his arm. “She used to tell my dad the same thing.”

Hannah knew that Jonathan’s dad died almost a year ago. She hadn’t known him, except that sometimes her dad and Jonathan’s dad would get together for beers and, instead of watching a game or playing pool, would talk about books. Hannah guessed that’s where Jonathan’s imagination and love of make-believe came from. His mom, Nikki, seemed like one of the most unimaginative people that Hannah had ever met. She pictured herself like Nikki—badly dyed hair, tacky key chain—sitting on a blanket in the bear house and nagging at Jonathan to stop playing, stop pretending, blocking him from every avenue and channel of make-believe, the only places where he could still see his dad, feel his presence, know that he would never be completely gone. She stopped for a moment to retie one of her sneakers. “My dad was friends with your dad,” Hannah said. “They used to hang out and talk about books and stuff.”

“I kind of remember that,” Jonathan said, swinging Commander back and forth by his ear. “Your dad’s cool. He always gave my dad cool books to read.”

“Yeah.” Hannah cinched her laces as tight as possible. There was no sound and barely any light in the pine woods, just dim light and shade and the distant rustle of animals making their way through the pine straw. “My dad’s going to be gone soon, too. He’s leaving me and my mom.”

Jonathan frowned. “Why?” He could imagine, Hannah thought, his dad dying, leaving his family because he had no choice. But a dad choosing to go away, that didn’t make sense to him.

Hannah shrugged. From where she sat, she could see the tree line, and beyond, the open field between the woods and her house, which looked blurred and against the smoky blue sky, as if seeing it through water. “My mom doesn’t love him anymore.”

Jonathan frowned again, switched Commander from arm to arm. “But your dad loves you still, right?”

“I guess.”

Jonathan nodded. “Then you should go with him.” He walked on without her, heading back to the house.

Hannah stayed where she was. She’d been on the verge of asking her dad to stay, just to give it all one more chance, so many times, but she’d never once thought about asking to go with him. She wanted her family to stay whole, but if she couldn’t have that, why not go with the parent she actually wanted to be with? She would have to move, change schools, make new friends, and in daylight she knew that might have seemed daunting, even scary, but in the shade of the pines, in that twilight tidal zone between the deep woods and the tree line, it felt like the most natural and powerful idea in the world.

Hannah stood up, energized, suddenly impatient for the evening so she could be alone with her dad and ask him to take her with him to the Kennepaws. She ran to catch up

with Jonathan and, feeling a surge of affection for him, tousled his hair like an adult would do. “Thanks, kid,” she said.

Jonathan shook her hand away, but smiled. “For what?”

Hannah shrugged. “Nothing. Promise me you won’t get lost in the woods again?”

“I didn’t get lost,” Jonathan said. “I saw them. The bears.”

Later that night, Hannah sat in their driveway—a pair of muddy ruts cutting through the brown grass—on a toolbox while her dad worked on his car. It was a blue 1987 Buick, big and imposing except for the rust spots dotting it like a leopard. When it stopped working a few months before, they didn’t have the money to fix it, and Hannah’s dad never took the time to try and fix it himself. But now he wasn’t working—everything in his life had stopped so he could get his life in order and heave himself away from Hannah and her mom—and the only way he could get away from them and up into the Kennepaws was if he fixed the Buick. Every night for the past few weeks, when the sun finally went down, he finished his microwave dinner and stuck his head under the Buick’s hood for hours. Hannah, usually bored with her isolation on the back porch by the time dinner and nightfall rolled around, kept him company. Her dad had a pair of snakelights for illumination; white light beamed out from under the Buick, like it was mounted on the moon or a cloud.

Hannah sat on a red toolbox and talked to him while he worked. Most nights he gave her one of the beers he brought out from the house. She drank them out of a sense of bonding, feeling like it was something a son might do, working on a car with his dad. She wasn’t sure she liked beer—it tasted like it looked, weak and brown—and the can felt too big for her hand, but she drank, and talked, and tried to soak up the remaining nights she

had left with him. Sometimes she just sat quietly and let herself be with him, knowing that soon he'd be gone and might not see him again for a long time.

“He said he saw the bears.” Hannah took a sip of her beer—the first sip, always the worst one for her, trying not to wince as the bitter metallic taste of it flooded her mouth. It reminded her of a time last summer when she bit her tongue. Blood had pooled in her mouth; she tasted it for days afterward. “Out in the woods, past the house.”

Only her dad's waist and legs protruded from under the Buick. His shoes were brown and dingy, a working man's shoes, a soon-to-be divorced man's shoes. Hannah could barely tell that he was moving under there. “Well,” he said, then paused as he did something to the car's undercarriage, ratcheting and clanking with some mysterious tool, “I doubt he really saw a bear. Only bears left around here are up in the mountains, like I told you. The tourist trade was so big years ago, people were building winter cabins down into this area, right up towards town. Hunted down all the bears, elk, everything else.” More ratcheting, more clanking. His right foot twitched to the left for a moment, then back. All around them, the night closed in, hot and sticky, alive with buzzes and clicks from unseen bugs. “Of course, after that bad winter, most of those places got sold off or abandoned. That's probably what the house is.”

Hannah opened her mouth to say something, then stopped. Her mom was watching them from the living room window. Against the window she was featureless, just a woman-shaped outline of darkness, but Hannah knew that she was looking at her and the beer in her hand. She defiantly took a swig. The figure at the window retreated and dropped the curtain into place.

“Your grandma’s cabin was damaged real bad that year, too,” her dad, “but we fixed it up before the next winter. Took us all year, but we did it. I should be fine there for a while.” Ratchet, ratchet. Clank, clank.

Hannah tightened her grip on the beer can. She hated when he did this, when he brought up the fact that he was leaving so casually, like it was no big deal. It felt like a challenge, like he was trying to force her to be okay with everything. If anything, it made her less okay with it, because every time he talked about her grandmother’s cabin and going to live there, she pictured their own house, empty of all his books and knickknacks, echoing hallway, dirty vinyl floor, mom smoking in the kitchen, nothing in the house but dead air and white noise. In contrast, she pictured life with her father: snuggled into the warm darkness of a cabin perched on the icy edge of the Kennepaws, the air clean and cold and devoid of summer, the two of them revolving through the year like silent companionable stars, able to speak but choosing quiet instead, wrapping themselves up in it like blankets.

“Dad,” she said, quietly, as if afraid someone was at the living room window with a glass to her ear, listening intently, “what if I came with you? At least for the summer?”

The ratcheting and clanking stopped. Hannah tightened her grip even more on the beer can without realizing it; the aluminum popped and bent inwards beneath her fingers.

Her dad pushed himself out from under the Buick and looked up at her. His brown hair stuck up every which way, a grease spot black on his forehead. “Hannah,” he said, in that patient parent voice that she knew meant he was winding up for a lengthy, world-weary “no.”

“Forget it,” she said, and looked away from him. Not at the house, not at the sky, just away, picking a spot on the grass and staring back into herself, wishing she could take it back, wanting more than anything not to hear the quiet, patient, wise parental explanation

why she *had* to stay and live with her mom. The two of them sat like that for several moments, not looking at each other, aware that the wrong words, said here, would be terrible and damaging.

Her dad finally sighed and said, “You need to stay with your mom, Hannah. She can take care of you. Your school is here, your friends.” He reached up with a red grease rag—a blur of scarlet in the evening dark—and wiped the oil off his forehead. “It’s better that you stay here. I’d love to have you with me, but you’re not going to be happy up in the mountains with nothing to do but count stars and listen to wolves at night.”

Hannah glanced up to the front window. The dark shape of her mom was gone, but Hannah imagined she could still see a faint trace of it, like an afterimage blooming against her eyes after a camera flash. She compared the two thoughts—staying here with her mom for the rest of her life, avoiding each other, barely speaking, two women staking out territory in the smallest house known to man, or living free and wild with her dad in the cold Kennepaws, home-schooling herself and only having the birds and berries for company. She almost opened her mouth to argue that yes, she would be happy, she would be happier than anything to leave her mom, leave everything, and just start over again and be free and clean, except that as she looked up to her dad, he was looking away from her, out east, to where the dark line of the Kennepaws was just a faint purple haze lit up by the lights from Blackchurch town proper. He smiled to himself, the grease rag clenched in his fist, and she realized that more than he was thinking of her own happiness, he didn’t want her to come with him. He wanted to go alone. To be alone.

Hannah didn’t say anything else, just drained the last of her beer and went around the back of the house. Sitting on the porch, the fans blowing cool air on her in the still night,

she looked out over the backyard and thought she might cry herself to sleep, but no tears came.

Jonathan's mom Nikki was going on an two-day trip down into Overton with friends from her nursing department at the hospital. When she asked Hannah to babysit Jonathan overnight and Hannah immediately agreed, she seemed surprised. Hannah supposed that in Nikki's mind, girls her age had social calendars full of movies, trips to the shopping mall in Blackchurch, giggly sleepovers at each other's houses. But all Hannah had was her back porch and her dad's evening attempts to get the car running. She accepted Nikki's offer with a sigh of relief, happy for Jonathan's company and distraction. She had begun to dread the afternoons when Nikki picked him up, leaving Hannah alone in the house with her parents and all the things she didn't want to think about.

Nikki picked Jonathan up on Friday afternoon and brought him back a few hours later. Jonathan bounded up the back porch steps and took his usual place on the patio couch, propping Commander up beside him. Nikki stayed outside, looking up at Hannah. She had on a simple, low-cut blue dress, and her hair was slicked back and styled. She wore red flats. "You sure you don't mind feeding him?"

"Nah, we'll order pizza," Hannah said. "Right, Jonathan?"

He nodded, distracted by the television.

"All right," Nikki said. Her cheap sunglasses sat low on her face, but the frames were so big that they covered and dominated her eyes. Hannah had never seen her eyes unobscured by the sunglasses in the whole time that she'd been babysitting Jonathan. Nikki shifted from foot to foot, half turned as if to walk off, then stopped and turned back.

"Hannah? Make sure he doesn't run off by himself, all right?" She glanced off towards the

woods, the treeline blurred and dark, a single shadowed entity, in the failing light. “I know he likes to go for walks in the woods, but the fires, and—it won’t be safe. Okay?”

“Sure thing,” Hannah said. Nikki, satisfied by Hannah’s brief, monotone answer, nodded and walked back around the house to her car.

“Hannah!” Jonathan jumped off the couch and ran to the TV. “There are fires in the forest! Look!” He pressed his hand flat against the screen, smearing it. Under his hand, the television flashed a “LIVE” picture of darkening woods punctuated by little spurts of flame and smoke. The local news said that the forest fires in Clurken County were getting worse with every day that it didn’t rain. Evacuation watches were on for the entire country, right up to the Mackinaw foothills. The smoke had gotten worse in the last few days, too, but Hannah didn’t see any telltale flames on the horizon.

“It’s all right,” she said, turning away from the television and looking for the cordless phone so she could order pizza for their dinner. “Those fires are small, they’ll be out soon.”

“But the bears!”

Jonathan sounded so panic-stricken that Hannah turned around, surprised. His small chest heaved up and down in panic. “We have to warn the bears! They’ll burn up!” His voice cracked. Commander sat cool and still on the patio couch, silent, watching.

Hannah sighed. She was hungry and hot. All she wanted to do was order pizza and drink an entire two-liter bottle of Coke and pass out under the fan while watching television. “Jonathan, the bears will be fine. Bears can...um...smell smoke. From miles away. They’ll avoid the worst of it, I promise.”

Jonathan turned back to the TV. “But—”

“If it’ll make you feel better,” Hannah said, interrupting him, “we’ll go for a walk tomorrow when it’s light and check on the bear house. How about that?”

Jonathan stood still where he was. He looked at the TV, then looked over at Commander, as if listening to something the stuffed rabbit was saying. Then he climbed up onto the patio couch and said, “Okay. Can we put on some cartoons?”

Later that night, a knock on the screen door woke Hannah out of a light doze. Jonathan slept on the couch, snuggling Commander. The TV had shifted out of Friday night sitcoms into the late news, which Hannah instinctively reached out and switched off. Her dad stood silhouetted against the screen. The night was bright and white with moon, but the moon itself was out of view.

Without being asked, Hannah got up and opened the door, stepped out into the yard with her dad. He’d been working on the car—he clutched the grease rag in his hands and there was a vague red bruise on his forehead from where he’d undoubtedly bumped it on the undercarriage.

“What’s up?” Hannah asked, folding her arms.

Her dad trembled with excitement, shaking from his inability to hold in some profound emotion that was swelling so vast inside him his body seemed unable to hold it. “Come on,” he said, and walked around the side of the house to the driveway. Hannah looked back at Jonathan. With the television off, she could barely see him asleep on the white wicker patio couch, a vague shape in the dark, but Commander’s ears stood up distinctly. Content that he was sound asleep and likely to remain so, she followed her dad.

He sat in the front seat of the Buick instead of shoved under it. All the boxes that she’d helped him unfold, pack, and tape up, all the books and oddities that they’d meticulously packed up over the last two weeks, sat stacked and clustered in the yard, which

was rapidly growing wet and shiny with the night humidity. The bottoms of the boxes, resting on the wet grass, were already stained and damp, as if they'd wet themselves.

The sound of an engine starting, rumbling reluctantly to life, snapped Hannah's attention back to her dad in the front seat of the Buick. The car was running, running, and Hannah's dad smiled and slapped the steering wheel, ran his greasy hands along it. He snapped on the headlights once, flashed the brights, then switched them and the car off. Satisfied, he got out, shut the door loudly, not caring if anyone in the house heard it. "We did it," he said, smiling, and swept Hannah up into a hug. "She's ready to go. Just got to get her packed up." He let her go, looked down at her with a huge smile.

Hannah tried to smile, tried to be happy, when what she really wanted to do was slash the Buick's tires, or rip its engine out and toss it in a lake so her dad could never find it. She'd known he'd be leaving, that working on the car and packing up the boxes was not just a way to fill her time during summer vacation, but seeing him in the car, his hands on the wheel, suddenly brought home to her that he was *leaving*, and she would be alone alone alone with her mom, and she couldn't stay on the back porch for the rest of her life. She thought of the other night, when she asked if she could go with him and he refused. She wanted to believe it was all over concern for her happiness, but the man in front of her, holding her arms, about to come out of his skin with excitement, seemed only concerned with his happiness, which for him meant getting as far away as possible. She should be angry, should be crying and begging him not to go or yelling at him to get on with it, but standing on the lawn with boxes clustered all around, what she really felt was a deep hollow, as if something vast was emptying out of her, was being packed up in a running car that waited impatiently for the glorious moment when it could speed away out of sight towards the mountains.

If her dad interpreted her silence as something strange, he didn't say so. He hugged her again. Hannah hugged back and managed to croak out, over his shoulder, "Do you need help getting the boxes in the car?"

"No ma'am." He let go of her and backed into his boxes, all of them clustered at his feet like pets or small children ready to be lifted into the car, to go bye-bye. "You go on back to sleep. I'm leaving at six a.m., if you want to, you know, say good-bye." He said "if," like there was a question of whether or not this was a good idea, but for her or for him, Hannah couldn't tell. She merely nodded in response, then turned and walked back around the house to the back porch. She would be there, to say goodbye. She couldn't imagine waking up and having him vanished, with his Buick and his boxes, without watching him go, without being right there at that moment of departure when the thing leaving pulls away with force from everything that is keeping it tethered.

The digital watch she wore, a Christmas present from a distant grandparent, had an alarm setting that Hannah never used. She set it for 5:45 a.m. Then she tried to go to sleep, curled up on the old futon, but for the longest time she found herself unable to do anything but stare up into the night sky, waiting for the moon to finally float into view.

Hannah woke in darkness, and her first thought was *I've missed him, he left without letting me say goodbye*. She widened her eyes, trying to see through the blur of sleep, and grabbed her watch, pressed the tiny button on the side that lit it up in aqua neon. 5:30. He hadn't left yet. Panicked, wanting to be sure, she got up and walked around the side of the house. The Buick was still there, packed to bursting with boxes. The yard was empty, and the sun had started to rise in the distance, grey light swallowing up the stars.

Confused, unsure why she'd thrashed awake so desperately, Hannah walked back around to the porch. She sat down on the futon and was about to curl back up with a blanket when she looked over at the patio couch.

Jonathan was gone. Commander sat there alone.

Her first thoughts were rational—he's gone inside to use the bathroom or to get a glass of water. She got up and went inside, checked the bathroom, the kitchen—but he wasn't there. She walked out into the front yard, looked up and down, but saw no sign of him. She walked back around to the porch, panic revving up inside her, thinking that maybe she just hallucinated, just looked over the fact that he was sleeping right where he was supposed to be.

He wasn't.

"Jonathan!" she cried, a thin wail that slipped out of her as she looked again at the empty couch and realized fully that he was gone. For a few seconds the panic revved, thrummed. Hannah spun through all the dark scenarios you see on the evening news: children stolen out of homes, butchered, or worse, missing forever, their fates unknown. She stood in the back yard, shifting back and forth. Where could he have gone? What was he doing? She lurched forward, touched the door, about to run inside and wake up her mom, call the police, then stopped and turned around. Even at night, the pine woods seemed darker than everything else, as if repelling or sucking in every available scrap of light that passed too close.

Hannah only stopped to grab a flashlight from the kitchen drawer. She hastily and sloppily tied the laces of her sneakers. She was about to leave the porch, but Commander's long ears, almost like they were trembling with concern in the dimness, caught her eye, and she grabbed him, too.

* * * *

In the dawn darkness, the bear house reared up suddenly through the trees, menacing and primal. The haze of smoke in the air, the smell of burning, seemed to come from it. She flicked on the flashlight and beamed it around the clearing. “Jonathan!” She walked around the house, calling out every few feet. “Jonathan! Jonathan!” No commands, no threats, no entreaties. Just his name, over and over again.

He wasn’t there.

She peered cautiously inside, through the empty window, but did not use the flashlight. She couldn’t see anything. “Jonathan,” she called, but she whispered it. “Jonathan, are you here?” She wasn’t sure why she was whispering, other than some instinct to avoid attracting the attention of anything threatening. Animals, maybe. She had heard stories from kids at school about hobos, drug addicts, and unemployed teens who lived wild in the woods, sheltering in abandoned cabins and cottages and living feral. This might be such a place. She thought she heard some noise from inside, some scuffling, a movement against dusty wood, but no one answered her. Hannah couldn’t see into the house from where she stood. There was no noise. Complete silence, a darkness made only slightly less threatening by the morning light starting to turn and billow down among the trees.

A small jagged piece of fear rose up from Hannah’s stomach and settled just under her lowest rib. If Jonathan was there, he should have heard her by now. He should have responded. Close by, the first bird of the morning lifted its voice in song, a golden spill of music sputtering and stop-starting like an old engine, finally pushing its way into the air. The sound, loud and sharp and cutting against the quiet in the pine woods, made Hannah jump.

Something in the house brushed against a wall. Then, louder, the sound of wooden floorboards, old and misused, groaning under a shifting weight. A small cough, ragged and high. A child's cough. Jonathan.

“Jonathan!” Hannah yelled. She launched herself through the front door, jumping awkwardly over the missing patches of porch, grabbing onto the doorless frame and swinging herself haphazardly into the dark. Everything in her vision went blank and dark as her pupils began to expand and let in the little light there was, but there was no mistaking the figure standing just inside the door, small and white in his t-shirt, his thatch of dirty blond hair. “Jonathan!” she said. She reached out to touch his shoulder, because his back was to her, and he wasn't turning around—

—and beyond him, something great and dark in the next room, something alive in the quiet like a new storm, like the barest hint of purple in the white clouds, slowly resolving itself into a great mass of seething, hulking rain, dominating the sky—

Hannah took her hand off Jonathan's shoulder and stepped back, involuntarily, her concern for the kid overridden by the instinct for survival, the instinct all prey animals have when confronted with their predators—flight. She fought herself, felt her body pushing her out the door, could see herself fleeing the woods, across the field to home. Home. Her dad. She reached down to her wrist; no watch. She had no idea what time it was. Her dad was leaving at six a.m.

The bird who started singing before abruptly did so again. This time there was no hesitation—a powerful punch of notes, and close by, another bird answered. The final notes of their duet wove together and faded into the morning.

The room smelled of wet animal, not like a dog, something wilder and deeper, like the ground after rain.

Hannah reached out again and touched Jonathan on the shoulder. When he didn't turn or respond to him, she grabbed his shoulder and pulled him, pulled him out of the house, pulled him through the woods, both of them stamping through a pool of brackish water, socks and shoes turned brown and wet. Hannah could hear nothing but her body's own urgency to get away from the house. Everything else—Jonathan's ragged breathing, the sound of their feet and bodies pushing through the woods, the light coming through the trees—bounced off her and away. She moved through them, impassive, unaffected, a juggernaut that would not be stopped. She took Commander herself, one hand wrapped around his ears, the other gripping Jonathan's thin wrist so tight that she knew she was hurting him, and didn't care. She realized that she'd lost her flashlight, dropped it somewhere, but it didn't matter. She didn't need it. She was pointed toward home like a swallow towards its winter roost, the destination unseen but throbbing powerfully as a beacon on some wavelength only she, in that moment, could hear in the breaking morning.

The truck was gone. The empty spot on the driveway where it used to sit dominated Hannah's vision, reached out like a black hole and sucked her in. She'd missed him.

"It was a bear," Jonathan said, clutching Commander. His eyes were bright with terror and elation, breathless from the run and from vindication. He didn't notice the missing truck. He couldn't care less. All he was worried about was his make-believe animals. Hannah felt a dark, nauseating urge to hold him down and spank him.

"It wasn't a bear," she barked. She felt the urge, forgotten since childhood, to clap her hands over her ears and shut out what Jonathan was saying, shut him out entirely: his presence, his runaway stunt, his stupid stuffed animal. "Stop saying that. There are no bears." She said it over and over to herself, like a chant.

“It *was* the bears,” Jonathan yelled, stomping around to stand in front of her. He shouted into her face. “They caught me. You saw them!” He brandished Commander at her, forcing her to give in. “You saw them in the next room!”

Hannah stomped. “There are no stupid bears!” The feeling coursed through her, purely and satisfyingly destructive, to take Jonathan by his neck and rub his nose in what he’d done like a puppy who peed on the carpet. She snatched at the rabbit. “There’s no such thing! You’re making it all up!”

Threads snapped. Commander’s right ear tore cleanly away from his head and hung from Jonathan’s hand, leaking cream-colored stuffing. Hannah tossed his earless rabbit at him like a dishrag and stalked past him onto the backporch without an apology. When he pushed open the screen door and sat next to her on the futon, she stood, snatched up her pillow and blanket and her collage materials and stormed inside. Her mom sat at the dining room table reading a weeks-old *People* and drinking coffee. Hannah slowed as she walked past and looked at her mom, really *looked* at her for the first time in weeks—she looked more thin than she ever had, her short dark hair starting to grow out wild and curly. Sitting at the table in a too-big bathrobe without her makeup, she looked bizarrely young, so young that for a minute Hannah experienced an extreme sense of vertigo, as if she’d walked through her own door into a stranger’s house. Her mom looked up and raised an eyebrow. Hannah hoisted the pillow farther up under her arm. She didn’t know what to say, what to signal. Her mom looked at her for a moment longer, then went back to reading her magazine. Hannah walked quietly by and up the stairs to her old room. She watched from her window when, a short while later, Jonathan’s mom came and picked him up.

A few days later, the Clurken County Fire Department evacuated Hannah, her mom, and everyone else who lived nearby because of the forest fires. They watched from a hotel

in Overton as men and water fought the blaze. Hannah's mom mostly slept. Hannah, however, stayed glued to the TV, hoping to catch a glimpse of their house still intact, but more often than not she found herself scanning the wide aerial shots of the dense pine woods for a hint or a shadow that might have been the bear house. She couldn't have said whether she hoped it was okay or burned to the ground, only that she was desperate to know its fate. Hannah had brought little with her to the hotel; a drawing pad, some magazines and paper and glue to make collages, and a stuffed rabbit with a monocle and a missing ear. When she'd gone downstairs again the last day she'd seen Jonathan, the day her dad left, Commander had been sitting on the futon, watching the television that Jonathan left on.

CHAPTER SEVEN: POEMS FOR SIMON PETER

“Shave my head,” Simon Peter commanded, and my best friend Doolittle cheerfully obliged him. I sat on the porch swing and watched, a crudely-rolled joint hot between my fingers. My boyfriend, the Captain, was inside by himself, watching a Kurosawa film on VHS for a project. It was the summer after our sophomore year at Dryden Mount College, and the four of us shared a ramshackle yellow house two blocks from campus, working crappy summer jobs in town and taking a few courses, doing everything we could to avoid going home to the backwoods suburbs we all came from. No one told us there would be a heatwave and a gas shortage. The Shack had no air conditioning; we bought a fleet of fans and arranged them around the house for maximum cooling and attractiveness, as if they were vases of flowers. We placed the biggest fan, a white monstrosity the size of a cornstalk, on the house’s wooden porch, and at night we lounged there, where it was moderately less stuffy.

I didn’t know Simon Peter well, other than that, like the Captain and me, he was gay and free to enjoy it here at school. Doolittle, her red hair tied up and out of the way, ran a cheap electric razor over his scalp. “Oh,” he said, as the first long strands of hair, dark and limp with sweat, fell away. “Oh, that’s nice.” Watching his bare scalp emerge from under that long, tangled mat of hair was arousing, titillating, like watching someone take off their clothes. I shifted my position on the porch swing to hide my erection. I’d been with the Captain for two months, and I already missed that intense feeling of connecting and canoodling with a naked stranger, in that way we miss childhood toys whose shape and color we can only vaguely recall. I called him Simon Peter because he told funny stories about a

guy he dated once who looked like Jesus. I did this with most people; as a kid, I had a hard time remembering names, so I just made up nicknames for everyone, and I never stopped. Doolittle's real name was _____, but she and I first bonded over *My Fair Lady*. The Captain was so called because his favorite piece of decoration in our bedroom was a ship-in-a-bottle he'd built with his grandfather years before.

The phone rang inside the house. "_____"! Dootittle yelled to my boyfriend. When he made no reply, she swore. "Here, Jordan, take over." She put the razor down on the porch and ran inside.

I sucked briefly on my joint, then stabbed it out on the huge ashtray that sat on the front windowsill. Simon Peter grinned at me, his head half-shaved, his face red and shiny with sweat. "Now, don't fuck it up," he said.

The razor felt dangerous and alive in my hands, vibrating with a naughty, insistent thrumming that made me think of the vibrator the Captain kept in our bedside table. I ran the razor close over him, following the intimate curves and dips of his scalp. His sweat made his head slick and wet under my fingers. He shivered just once as I trimmed the hair at the base of his neck, his lean back muscles bunching under his wifebeater. I pressed the bulge in my shorts once, lightly, against his back. He didn't say anything, didn't even turn his head, but I'm pretty sure he grinned.

Doolittle came back out onto the porch as I finished. "Jordan, you missed his sideburns," she said, and grabbed the razor out of my hands. I shrugged apologetically at Simon Peter. He winked at me as I walked into the house.

Later, the Captain and I had lazy, half-hearted sex, not even bothering to get out the lube and do the job properly. Cold weather fueled real passion, ignited it with crisp smells of the dying world. Passion in the summer took too much energy, too much sweat. Even

having sex under a fan felt sticky and turgid. We sat around in our underwear and smoked a pack of cigarettes, watched *The Daily Show*, barely talked to each other, comfortable with each other's companionable silence. The scent of jasmine tangled in through the open window and covered the room in thick perfume.

Sex energized and drained me; after the Captain fell asleep, I sat by the window and wrote. Outside, moths took to the air in fluttering, dingy flocks. The poem I was working on was about a moth flying around and around a porch light, never stopping, never changing direction, always retreading its own ground. As I sat there, however, images of Simon Peter found their way in: his shaved head emerging from behind a curtain of hair; his wifebeater filmy and transparent with sweat against his chest. I spilled it all into the Word document. My hard-on came back, familiar in the dark, not the desire I felt for the Captain and his lean, nerd-sexy body, but the dirty, slightly cheap lust for a muscular stranger. I leaned back in the chair and jacked off thinking about Simon Peter, about peeling off his wifebeater and running that razor over him everywhere.

Lexington, my poetry professor that summer, invited me back to her office a few days later, after we turned in our newest poems. I called her Lexington because she was a battleship of a woman, broad and impenetrable in her masculine pants suits. The room was still and airless. I waited patiently while she stuffed tobacco into an ivory-enameled pipe and puffed it to life. Vanilla tumbled through the room.

She pointed the stem of the pipe at me, a Victorian gesture, anachronistic and accusatory. "Your poems are lacking something lately, Jordan."

Instantly on the defensive, I clutched my bag more tightly in my lap. "How can you tell?"

“Because I’ve been reading your stuff and teaching you for two years and I know.”
Lexington narrowed her eyes, peered at me through pipe smoke. “You’re bored.”

I opened my mouth to argue and then stopped. She was right. Every day was the same: working part-time at the video rental in town; coming home to the Shack; dinner; sitting on the front porch; sweaty, fitful sleep. Every few days, a poetry class punctuated the monotony, but even those felt like rehashes of things, poems, and poets I’d seen several times over. The only thing different, the only spot of excitement and newness in the whole summer routine, was Simon Peter’s newly-shaved presence in the house.

When I didn’t respond, Lexington nodded. “You know it, deep down. You’re not putting anything into it. This poem for class,”—she held it up—“is *not* your best work. It’s lifeless. Pretty words, but it doesn’t say anything you haven’t said before.” She put the pipe and paper down, waved a hand through the haze hanging around her mouse-brown hair. “You have better poems than this in you. You’re getting to the end of your degree. Time to start thinking about your thesis. Time to challenge yourself. Understand?”

I nodded, and then left.

That night, the Captain was out with friends and Simon Peter was working a night shift at the town Wal-Mart. I sat on the porch swing and smoked a pack of clove cigarettes with Doolittle. Ostensibly, I started smoking because it seemed dangerous and collegiate, but really it was because of her. Smoking gave us something to do while we talked. “How are things with _____?” she asked, referring to the Captain.

I exhaled. “Stagnation.”

Doolittle dropped her cigarette. She cursed and lit another. “What?” Her breath smoked with irritation.

“Stagnation. I’m most afraid of stagnation.” I shifted on the porch swing, drew my knees up to my chest as if afraid the admission, the moment of vulnerability, would increase my personal gravity and draw ill-starred planets down on my head.

Doolittle looked at me, the cigarette lighting her face orange against the blue and grey of lampless, moon-filled night. “I didn’t ask you.” She laughed, then tapped her cigarette and offered it to me. “Are we playing a game? ‘I never?’”

“Confession.” Lip gloss, her one concession to stereotypical female vanity, smacked of strawberry on my lips and then faded against the sudden influx of nicotine.

She whistled and nodded. “Right, then. Let’s do this properly.” She took the cigarette from me, puffed on it, and then flicked it into the darkness without putting it out.

“You could set something on fire,” I said, but she pulled me off the swing, turned me around, grabbed my shoulders, and forced me down onto my knees. I genuflected before the swing like it was a suspended Catholic pew. Doolittle took her seat on the other end of the swing, looking forward, not at me. Confession booth, then.

I sighed. “Bless me, father—”

“Mother.” Again, the smoke, the tinder-box snap of impatience.

“Excuse me?”

“In this game, women run the Church. All hail Mother Supreme Abbess _____.”

She looked down at me, analytical, peering into me. She slid into character.

“Bless me, *Mother*, for I have sinned. It has been never since my last confession.”

Doolittle coughed a little, situated herself primly on the edge of the bench. “And what sins have you to confess, my son Jordan?”

I made a face at her affected tone. “Just talk normally,” I hissed, trying to summon a ghost of that smoke and crack she got in her voice whenever she wanted cooperation.

She smiled and repeated in a normal voice, “What sins have you to confess, my son?” The words were ritual, but the voice was all hers. That, I could confess to.

Familiarity, I had no problem baring my soul to.

“I confess that I am afraid of stagnation.”

Mother Doolittle clicked her tongue and sounded for all the world, in that heartbeat, like a wise old woman taking in someone’s confidence and dissecting it, accurately, in an instant. “What troubles you about stagnation?”

I pressed my hand, palm-down, against the cool wood of the swing. “What do you mean? Everything. Everything about it troubles me. I don’t want to grow roots. I don’t want to grow moss. It’s one of the Seven Deadlies, you know?”

“Stagnation?”

“Sloth.”

Mother Doolittle laughed and disappeared. My best friend was once again in her place. “Those are hardly the same.” No implied question mark, no upward lilt of her voice at the end of her sentence. Nothing rhetorical in that question. Only the law of Doolittle.

“No, I guess not.” I got up, brushed dirt off my knees, and wondered why I bothered in the first place.

Then she asked me about Simon Peter. “What do you think of _____?” This question, out of nowhere.

I sat back down beside her. “He’s nice.” I reached for a cigarette, but the box was empty.

“Do you think he’s hot?”

I thought of shaving his head, my erection pressed against his back. “What does that have to do with anything?”

That was all the answer she needed. Doolittle picked up the empty cigarette box and got off the swing. It wavered back and forth at the sudden absence of her weight. “You look at him like he’s a piece of meat.” She hopped off the porch and looked back at me from the yard. “All I’m saying is, your boyfriend’s a nice guy. If you’re not into him, be honest about it.” Then she was gone, and I was alone on the swing with the smell of cloves and a plastic pink lighter.

Simon Peter arrived home the next afternoon at the same time as me, on my way back from class. He gave me a seminal male hello, the upward jerk of the chin, the muttered “sup?” His head and face were freshly shaved, and his muscles bulged under his wifebeater, the only shirt he ever wore.

I knew the Captain was inside the apartment, waiting on me.

“Hey,” I said.

He paused and looked back at me, his hand tight on the handle of the screen door.

“Yeah?”

I swallowed. “Can I bum a cigarette?”

He didn’t answer at first. Then, looking once into the dark, hot house as if to make sure the coast was clear, he let the screen door shut and sat down on the porch swing. I sat next to him and he offered me the cigarette dangling between his lips while he fished for another. I finished smoking his, imagining I could taste his sweat through the nicotine. We smoked half a pack together sitting on the porch, watching the smoke dissipate like blue ghosts into the pink sunset air. We didn’t talk, but the bare skin and hair of our legs brushed together every now and then.

A fat brown moth sat on the swing rail, completely still. “Hey,” Simon Peter said, waving at it, trying to make it fly away. It didn’t so much as flutter. Making a disgusted sound, he dragged loud and Hoover-like on his cigarette one last time and put out the butt on the moth’s lace-thing brown wings. It didn’t so much as twitch as it smoldered. He watched it for a moment. I felt him press his leg against mine, brief pressure, sweat and flesh. Like déjà vu of the night I shaved of his head, I got instantly hard, knowing there would be no hiding it under my thin shorts. Then Simon Peter got up and went inside without looking back at me or saying a word.

The moth, half its body crumbled to ash, was flecked with smoking embers. I put my cigarette out on the concrete and went inside as well. The Captain had fallen asleep on our bed watching *Solaris*, our fat red bedroom fan blowing directly onto his face. I locked our door and waited for my hard on to subside, undressed, and then crawled into bed next to him. I kissed his forehead gently, so as not to wake him.

“I don’t know what to do about it,” I told Doolittle later that night. We were doing the dishes together after one of her dinners while the Captain and Simon Peter smoked some pot on the porch. I kept craning my neck, trying to catch sight of them through the screen door.

Doolittle grabbed a plate out of my hands and rubbed a rag fiercely over the chipped white surface. “Leave well enough alone,” she said. “We’ve all got to deal with each other, at least for the rest of the summer. Just leave it alone.”

I squeezed blue soap into a sauce-caked pan. “I’ve got to do *something*. It’s driving me crazy. I can’t even finish a poem lately.”

“And that’s _____’s fault?” She dropped the rag on the counter, stared at me.

Laughter drifted into the house from the porch, along with the sweet cloying smell of marijuana and jasmine. “It’s nobody’s fault,” I said quietly. She looked at me for a long moment, then went outside and left me to finish the dishes by myself.

Monday, the Captain left for a week-long retreat in Richmond with other seniors in the film program. The school was paying for the gas to get them there. I sat on our bed while he packed, drawing helixes on my hand with a green pen.

“I paid rent already, so you don’t have to worry about that,” he said. He darted back and forth from the closet to the suitcase in a towel that threatened to fall off his hips. His hair was still wet from the shower. “Just make sure you get the mail, and don’t smoke pot outside until after dark. Don’t let anybody else, either.”

I looked up at his half-naked body, thinking back to our first weeks, our first sex, how my body rose to meet his, but looking at him now only put me in mind of the guy down the hall. I pressed the pen harder into skin, wondering if I could tattoo myself with sheer strength. My bed was going to be half-empty for a week. My poems still seemed to stall out unless I let myself write about that afternoon on the swing or the numerous dirty dreams I was having about Simon Peter. More than anything, I wanted to tell the Captain not to go because I was afraid of what I might do, but I’d been sitting on the bed for an hour watching him get ready and I still hadn’t done it. Maybe the memory of that night with the razor, or that afternoon on the porch. Maybe the fact that I was very aware of Simon Peter just a few rooms away—probably lying on his bed in his underwear—listening to The Smiths on vinyl, melancholy noise echoing through the house. Something was stopping me.

The Captain laid a few folded shirts in the suitcase, closed it, and got dressed. A brief flash of nudity, and then board shorts, no underwear, a tight “Film Student” t-shirt,

and a baseball cap. He kissed me goodbye on the cheek. “The guys wanted to leave at noon,” he said. “I’m late. See you when I get back?” He didn’t wait for an answer, just grabbed the suitcase and walked out of the bedroom. When I didn’t follow him, he came back. “Jordan?”

I put down the pen. Morrissey’s voice murmured from down the hall. I wanted to warn him not to go. I wanted to make him go away faster, and for longer. I wanted to be able to say “hurry back” and mean it.

Instead, I kissed him. “Have a good time.”

Later, when I went outside to smoke on the porch, Simon Peter was there. He sat on the swing, wearing nothing but his boxers. His bare chest glistened with a light sheen of sweat. “Where’s _____?” he asked.

I shrugged. “School trip.” I sat next to him and lit up.

He pulled out a new cigarette and looked at me.

“Come here,” he said.

I leaned in toward him. He pressed the tip of his cigarette against mine and breathed in, lighting it from mine. He took in a huge lungful of smoke, and laughed. “That’s called buttfucking.” More laughter. “But I guess you already knew that.”

I smiled back, and then something in Simon Peter’s expression changed, grew hungry, and he glanced out into the yard. It was the same look he had on his face that afternoon we smoked together before, when he peered into the house to make sure the Captain wasn’t watching.

I tried to write a poem that night, but I couldn’t get Lexington out of my head. Her vanilla pipe smoke clouded my brain and kept me from going where I wanted, cut the tendons of my words and prevented them from moving or changing. I tried opening the

window, brainstorming, jacking off, but nothing broke the dam. I could feel and see the heart of the poem, the shape of the words under the sheet, but I couldn't get under the sheet or cut through it, no matter what I tried.

At one o'clock in the morning, I walked down the hall to Simon Peter's room and knocked lightly. When he let me in, he was already naked. I barely had time to push down my shorts before his mouth, wet and smoky, found mine in the dark.

He fucked me on the floor and again in his bed. I licked his neck and he rutted in me like a stag in season. Afterwards, I lay in the bed, sticky and hot, listening to him take a shower across the hall, listening to the heavy thud of water hitting the shower floor full force like it does when you step out of the spray for a moment. I imagined I could hear him scrubbing soap over his muscles, his flat hairless stomach, his muscular thighs.

I crept back to my room and sat down to the poem I'd been struggling with. Suddenly, the words were there. The sheet was gone and the phrases came to hand easily, fitting my grasp as if they were tailored to me. Simon Peter's body flashed into my mind, the heat of him inside me, the wet scrape of tongue and sweaty stubble against my hip. The poem changed, spun in on itself. I stepped back. I would come back to it later, to refine, but the hard part was done. The words had come.

It was getting light outside. I crept down the hall and got in the shower with Simon Peter. He had opened the small window above the shower, just enough to let the steam out and keep the bathroom from becoming unbearable. I wondered why he was taking a hot shower. Then he kissed me and slipped a hand between my legs, and I stopped wondering. I got down on my knees, the hot spray hitting me in the head as I opened my mouth around him.

The Captain and I had never had sex in the shower. “That’s never as fun as it looks,” he said once when I suggested it. “Water doesn’t lubricate anything.”

We had sex two or three times every night that week. In the dark hours of early morning when Simon Peter finally fell asleep, exhausted and sated, I went back to my room and wrote, the poems coming quickly and easily, sliding easily into place on the greased residue in my mind of lube, sweat, and semen. When I was finished, I went back to sleep in Simon Peter’s bed. I couldn’t bring myself to sleep in the Captain’s bed when I was filled with someone else.

Doolittle made us dinner every night that week. The three of us sat around the table, eating spaghetti or meatloaf and not talking. I avoided looking at or touching Simon Peter because I could feel Doolittle watching both of us, suspicious and sharp. Our fingers brushed once when reaching for the bowl, and before I could help myself, I grinned at him. Doolittle narrowed her eyes.

After we washed the dishes, she turned to me. “Can I talk to you outside for a second?”

The swing was starting to sag from too much use. I was getting afraid that one afternoon it would pop right out of its bolts in the porch’s ceiling. I opted to sit on the edge of the porch, at Doolittle’s feet.

“This isn’t right.” She wasn’t smoking, and neither was I.

“I know.”

She kicked me lightly, her feet clad in worn green sneakers with pink laces. “That’s all you have to say? This is a really shitty thing to do to someone. _____ really likes you, and you cheat on him at the first opportunity.”

Her voice was getting loud, and that made me both defensive and nervous, as if the Captain might hear it wherever he was on the way back from Richmond. “Lower your voice,” I snapped. “We have neighbors.”

“Well, at least you have the decency to be afraid someone will hear.”

I stood up, feeling as if my whole body was ablaze with shame and anger, the one feeding and bleeding into the other. “You don’t understand the situation. You don’t have any idea what this feels like, so don’t get all high and mighty on me.”

In response, she got up and left. I kicked the swing, hoping it *would* come right out of the ceiling bolts and sail off the porch into the yard. It didn’t. Furious, and scared, my heart beating sharp and quick, I stormed inside and pulled Simon Peter into his room. Ignoring his feeble protests, I pried his legs apart, smoothed lube cool and slick over him and fucked him, fucked him, fucked him until dark stars burst behind my eyes and my pulse slowed to a crawl. I dimly heard him murmur “what was that all about?” before I rolled off of him and fell asleep.

The Captain came back. I’d bleached the shower until it gleamed and, in my agitation, cleaned and organized our usually messy room to the tiniest degree. “Wow, the place is sparkling,” he said as he dropped his bags and pulled me to our bed. “I missed you.” He unbuttoned my shirt.

We sat on the edge of the porch later, in our underwear, smoking. An ice cream truck rolled merrily by. The black lady who drove it waved at us, and we waved back. Night closed in after she passed, as if it were following her. The street lamps flashed on. Moths fluttered over them in thick, shadowy clouds, almost blotting out the light.

Simon Peter came out in his underwear, too, and sat down next to me. From the corner of my eye, I could see his face and hands as he lit up. He blew smoke up and out, maybe aiming at the brightening moon.

The Captain slid a hand down the front of his white briefs, scratched something. Simon Peter did the same. I glanced quickly at Simon Peter. He stared right at me and blew a gust of smoke against my bare chest.

“I’m going inside,” I said to the Captain. “Don’t let the moths in when you come in.”

“I think I’m going to quit smoking,” the Captain said later that night. We were in bed, exhausted from another bout of reunion sex and bored because late-night television had just ended.

I sat up. “Really?”

“Yeah.” To emphasize his point, he picked up his half-empty carton of Marlboros from the nightstand and tossed them in our wastebasket. “No one else on the retreat smoked, and, I don’t know.” He got up, fished his lighter out of the jeans he’d dropped on the floor in a hurry to get at me. “We had some good conversations about it. It’s really just a nervous habit. And it’s so bad for you.” He tossed the lighter in the wastebasket, too, and grinned at me. “So, new project. I’ll get some nicotine patches tomorrow.”

I sat quietly where I was, digesting this. The Captain got back into bed, snuggled up beside me. He kissed the spot just under my ear that I liked, the same spot Simon Peter licked and bit while I lubed him up on the floor of his bedroom. The Captain’s lips burned there, made me wince. “I missed you, you know,” he whispered. He snuggled me tight in his arms as he drifted off to sleep.

I waited until he was asleep, then gently disentangled myself, threw on a shirt and a pair of shorts, and went down the hall. Simon Peter answered the door naked, an unlit cigarette in his fingers.

“He’s going to quit smoking,” I said, by way of greeting.

Simon Peter laughed and opened the door wider. “Does that mean you want to come in?”

“No.” I scratched my wrist, fidgeting, trying to find diplomatic words. “I just wanted to tell you it won’t happen again.” I laid the words between us, heavy, like brick and mortar, building a wall right there in the doorway of his room.

I expected him to be confused, or maybe even a little angry. But Simon Peter only smiled wider, and shut the door gently in my face. I stood there, blinking, until I heard the snap-click of his lock.

Lexington stopped me as I left class the next day. “Jordan,” she barked, a peremptory summons. I stood by the lectern while she waited for the other students to disperse.

“Jordan,” she said again after the last of my classmates exited. She spoke more quietly, a hint of warmth in her tone. A small sprig of flowers gleamed white against her red suit jacket. “These new poems are some of your best work,” she said, holding it up. “I’d consider submitting them for publication if I were you. Send it to the people at the *Osceola Review*.” She shook the paper at me. “They’ll flip over this.”

The unexpected praise ballooned me from the inside, stretching my mouth wide in a grin I could not control. “All right, will do. Thanks.” I turned to go.

“One thing, though.” Lexington peered down at the paper, pointing at something with a red pen. “Is the name ‘Simon Peter’ really necessary? I mean, the Biblical allusion doesn’t really add anything.”

Her comment spiked through my elation, lacing it with something sour but undeniable, an uneasy lemon twist. I forced a laugh, and winced when I heard my voice crack. “You’re right. I’ll revise it a little before I send it.”

Lexington nodded, pleased, and turned to gather her things.

The Captain was out studying with some friends, and I tried one more time to write a poem without the crutch I feared I needed. Nothing came. Then Simon Peter flashed into my head, and the words broke open like a cloud of moths around a streetlamp.

He answered his door naked, again. No cigarette. The black star of the tattoo on his hip seemed painfully dark against his fair skin.

I handed him a copy of one of the poems I wrote about him, then stepped inside without being invited. I locked the door behind me.

I wrote poems about his arms, his knees, the freckles that spattered the back of his shoulders like a burnt constellation. I wrote poems about the sweat I licked from the back of his neck and the way his fingers found *that spot* without being told. Poems about sex and about waiting for sex, thinking about sex. Poems about the danger of knowing your boyfriend might come home any moment while you squeal on someone else’s mattress, spill your cum on someone else’s face. I wrote poems about the mountains and valleys his body made under the thin white sheet, about how his white white skin looked silver in the blue glow of the television. Poems about the reluctance, the gut-shredding anxiety of standing

up, leaving, and going back where I belonged, to my suddenly non-smoking boyfriend who picked a hell of a time to start acting like he loved me. I wrote a poem to him. Sorry, Captain, you missed it. My muse shaves his head and smokes like a chimney, and he likes it rough.

A few weeks later, at the end of the summer A term, I was back in Lexington's office. "We're back to square one," she said. She left her pipe sitting dark and unlit on her desk. Drops of sweat dotted her broad face. The air conditioning in the building was broken.

"What do you mean?" I hadn't been paying much attention in workshop. Every moment of my life was electric with a dark, guilty charge, sleeping with two men beneath the same roof and writing the best poetry of my short career because of it.

Lexington's fingernails were painted a dark, almost-black red that stood out like a shock against the white paper of my latest poem, another one I'd written in the hot flush of my fling with Simon Peter. "Your words. They're getting routine again." She pushed the paper at me, folded her arms across the front of her floral dress. "What's going on? There were one or two poems there where you really had a handle on things."

Surprised, I shrugged and stuffed the poem, covered in her editorial marks, in my bag. "You told me my poems sounded bored. I tried to change some things up, give myself some fresh angles." I stood, hefted my bag over my shoulder. "I thought they were working really well."

Lexington was quiet for a moment. Then she reached for her pipe. "Can I give you some advice?"

I stood silently in response.

She stuffed some tobacco in her pipe. “When you’re hitting a wall, creatively, most times it’s not anything external that needs to change.”

I left as she lit her pipe, the first plumes of vanilla smoke easing out her open window.

Summer classes ended, and the Captain grew more attentive. At night, when the three of us sat around on the porch or under the fans in the living room, he held my hand and hugged me and kissed me more and more in front of Simon Peter. I, in turn, ignored Simon Peter, not sure what I would see in his face if I looked at him, not sure I would like what I felt if I looked. One night the Captain called me into his arms and snuggled me tight despite the heat. Simon Peter ran the back of his hand over his sweating forehead, then quietly got up and disappeared into his room for the rest of the night.

The Captain frowned. “What’s wrong with him?”

Instead of telling him, I went to see Doolittle. She worked at the 24-hour computer lab and usually took a smoke break around midnight. The courtyard next to the computer building was filled with young birch trees. She sat under one on an iron bench, breathing smoke into the boughs.

I walked up to her and pulled a bottle of cheap white wine from a brown paper bag. “I’m sorry.”

She took the bottle from me. “Let’s be friends again,” she intoned. This was a ritual with us, the easy way to end an argument. She didn’t smile. “Are you still sleeping with him?” Doolittle took the bottle from me. She burned me with her cigarette as she did.

I winced away from her. “No,” I snapped, the pain purling up my arm and into my words. Rubbing the spot, I exhaled and said again, “No,” breathing it out quiet and final. “Not for a few days, at least.”

“Good.” She took a swig. “I like _____. He doesn’t deserve that.”

She gave me the bottle and I drank. I didn’t reply.

“Can I ask why you did it?” She lit another cigarette, watching me drink. “I mean, he’s hot. But so is _____.”

I put the bottle down on the bench. It was already half empty. “It wasn’t just that.”

“Then what?”

The neck of the green bottle felt slender and cool under my fingers, both pleasant and easy to break. I gripped it hard. “Being a poet is hard. You write from things you experience.” I picked up the bottle, handed it to her. “I just needed to *do* something.”

Doolittle looked at me, the orange tip of her cigarette and the moon beaming down through the birches the only light on her expression. Something subtle moved through her face; understanding, but more likely a kind of pity. “Well, go on a hike or something next time.”

A few days later, after summer A ended and summer B, began, I came home and found Simon Peter piling bags and suitcases and boxes of books outside the door. He saw me as I walked up, and he stopped. Sweat patterned the white shirt he wore, his face flushed with heat and effort, like I’d seen so many times in the bedroom. I hadn’t been in his bed in days, not since my conversations with Lexington and Doolittle.

I gestured to the pile of stuff. “Moving out?”

He wiped sweat off his face with the back of his hand. “For a little while. I’m not taking classes for the rest of the summer, and my grandparents invited me to stay with them in New England.” He reached down and fussed with a box. “It’s a lot cooler up there.”

“I’ll bet.” I shifted my bag from one shoulder to the other.

“Don’t worry, I paid my rent here through the summer, so you don’t have to find another roommate.” Simon Peter disappeared inside, brought out another box of stuff, and let it drop heavy and loud on top of the pile. “Besides, I think we’re done here.” He looked at me. It was a statement, not an accusation.

“Yeah, well,” I said. Then I moved forward, awkwardly leaned over the pile of stuff and kissed him on his stubbly, sweaty cheek. “I guess I’ll see you in August.”

He nodded. “Maybe you will.” He ran a hand over his shaved head; his scalp looked pricklier, scruffier. He was letting his hair grow out. “I’ll see you later.” He went back inside the house. I went into my room before he came back out, and waited a couple of hours before leaving again to make sure I wouldn’t see him before he left.

The summer grew quiet after Simon Peter left. In August, the day before we all moved into our fall dorms, Doolittle cooked us a final meal. We ate by candlelight. We joked and told funny stories from the previous school year. We talked about our new classes. The Captain enthusiastically told Doolittle about his short film project. I drank and ate and did not mention my poems, nor did I mention how the fourth empty chair at the table drew my attention.

Much later, after Doolittle went to bed, the Captain and I sat alone on the porch, smoking.

“I’m going to miss this house,” he said.

I craned my head, taking in the faded yellow paint and the worn trim. “It had its moments.” Then: “It’s weird without _____ here, anyway.”

I don’t know why I said it. Simon Peter was gone. The danger had passed, and my poems were beginning to change again. Yet the empty chair, the way Doolittle and the Captain didn’t mention him as if they never knew he was there or had erased him from the shared experience of the summer, irked me. I wasn’t brave enough to confess, but I also wasn’t going to let his moment and his potential danger pass unacknowledged by either of us.

The Captain grinned at me. “You had a little crush on him.”

I shrugged.

Still grinning, he stood up and offered me a hand. “It’s okay. I had a crush on him, too.” Now he shrugged, mimicking me. “We’re even.”

I grabbed his hand and pulled myself up. The porch creaked under our weight, and something rustled under the boards. The Captain stepped inside, his body dark against the screen, lit from behind by the living room lamps. I stayed where I was, the heel of one sneakered foot on the edge of the porch as if prepared at any second to push off backwards and fling myself away. The Captain moved away, deeper into the house, and the summer night rushed in to fill the space he left, jasmine and heat and cricket song, moths clustered around the porch light, their tiny shadows flickering across the screen door.

CHAPTER EIGHT: WRITING LIFE ESSAY

In writing fiction, a primary goal of mine is to incorporate the musicality of language we often see in poetry. I want to make textual music with my prose. As a mission statement, this is both trivial and tricky. Obviously, writers want their work to be both art and architecture, a rousing story told with language that is efficient and stirring. Making textual music—every image a chord, every thought and action a fermata—requires looking into the tensions that exist between poetry and fiction as textual media. Most poetry is less concerned with what’s being said as it is with *how* it’s being said: execution vs. content. This is an immutable quality of poetry and one of its chief advantages over fiction. There are only so many ways for a fiction writer to write about the moment of a breakup, but for a poet, the possibilities are endless: infinitely divided layers. It is more difficult for fiction to achieve this, more difficult to crystallize and subdivide moments and hesitations. The larger the canvas, the less microscopic the vision. The view from a skyscraper is vastly different than the view through a magnifying glass. Fiction is the vista. It is motion, where even the most restless poetry is more akin to a held breath. In this way, the two genres are opposites sides of the musical coin. A song has momentum but is finite, circumscribed, and distilled.

There are several poets on my reading list, all different in their way, but still possessed of that particular gift to distill moments and experiences, and to craft language as vivid as any painting. In fiction, even simply functional prose will pass muster if your storytelling and characterization are up to snuff. My goal, however, is to craft music out of words as a poet does, to write with rhythm and melody. I want every metaphor to softly chime, for every action and reaction to thrum like a plucked string on the upright bass. Of

course, poets are able to focus on the aesthetics of their language with such precision because they are writing about distilled moments. They are not hurried along by the demands of tangible story. The attempt to marry fiction and poetry is to make art out of mere phrases without sacrificing momentum and engagement.

Many of the prose authors on my reading list achieve this marriage in one form or another. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* is so immersed in the poetry of intensely detailed moments, it is practically a novel in verse. Woolf forsakes the typical momentum of fictional narrative and instead cuts into each moment and each thought as one would a vein, laying it open and unfolding all that lies within a passing car or the shadow of a tree in Regents Park. If fictional narratives exist on a spectrum, with one end slowly fading into verse and poetry, *Mrs. Dalloway* is the last stop on that continuum, a breath away from being a long poem. In this case, it's not Woolf's story structure that I wanted to learn from—the stream-of-consciousness immersion in minute moments is not necessarily my style of narrative—but instead the way poetic language is used to achieve plot and character.

A wide selection of differing poetic voices was necessary in order to synthesize and achieve poetic effect in fiction. Tony Hoagland's straightforward, often humorous poems balance out the surreal verses of Laura Kasischke and Mary Ruefle, whose poems unfurl like strange fires sparking and spreading, their bizarre but beautiful images constructing a dream language all their own. The narrative verses of Sharon Doubiago, relating in simple and almost journalistic verse a trip to South America with her daughter, are counterpointed by Jack Gilbert, who takes concrete and specific moments and moves beyond them—or farther into them. While fiction can sometimes settle for functionality at the level of the word and sentence, poetry is never satisfied unless plumbing the depths of what language can achieve on the page. Striving for artfulness while still attempting to master the techniques of story is

a tough goal, but from my individual artistic standpoint—knowing what I want to achieve with my fiction—one cannot exist without the other. The story “Some Birds Roost on Rotten Branches” can be seen as an example of this goal coming to fruition (hopefully) in fictional form. The story spends most of its focus on a particular morning, choosing to carefully render the minute shockwaves and emotions of that moment in finely honed language rather than lumber from moment to moment. And of course, it is the type of story being told that demands such function, a bird slowly leaping into flight as opposed to a hound on the hunt.

This is not to say that the fictional cornerstones can be ignored. Rather, the focus on poetry and musicality of language in fiction makes the fiction basics much more important. Writing pretty words on the page without the support of storytelling mechanics—in other words, art without architecture—is pointless. Even poetry has the support of emotion or a “moment.” It stands to reason that the larger architecture of fiction could support even greater achievements of artistic language—again, see *Mrs. Dalloway*—but only if the architecture in question is well-planned and solidly constructed. When I entered UCF as an undergraduate, I had a great innate love for storytelling but lacked an understanding of the elements needed to construct it, the machine that generates the illusion. By the time I finished my undergraduate creative writing work and prepared to begin my MFA work, I’d come to hold the art of telling a good story in high regard. Many writers of fiction both amateur and accomplished can successfully wield the tools of plot, character, etc, but to me there is still a shortage of those who actually wield these tools towards the end of telling a “good story.”

With the fiction selections on my reading list—both novels and short-story collections—I tried to select writers who were both accomplished technicians but also knew

how to just tell a good story. I also selected writers—again, like Virginia Woolf—who pushed the boundaries of “story” and challenged the limits of what story can accomplish, just as poets do with sounds and images. Richard Russo, for example, tells a fairly straightforward tale, using his gift for language—rich but never needlessly complex—to move his loveable characters through time and space towards the inevitable concatenation of the story’s events. Writers like Alice Munro and Toni Morrison bend that most peculiar of fictional qualities—time—to create a new kind of story. In the case of Munro, it is a novel-in-stories, a woman’s life segmented and presented chronologically but never resting in a single time, reaching back and forward in time from its various vantage points to underscore a moment or present a vision of the moment’s inevitable future fallout. Similarly, Morrison’s *Beloved* exists in several times at once. The narrative itself is a kind of ghost, the afterimage of the past superimposed on the present. I tried to be similarly experimental in “Proof of Snow,” a story anchored in one time but frequently and necessarily dipping into the past to grace-note the actions and developments in the present. And on the other side of things we have “Poems for Simon Peter,” starting at Point A and moving directly through to Point B, but still examining the story’s characters and events on all levels. Different types of narratives achieve different effects. The skeleton of a church is different than the skeleton of a boat, constructed respectively to travel in the medium of prayer or water, but neither less or more than the other.

My preoccupation with fiction’s possibilities and limitations—artistically and architecturally—has been fostered by my experience with the writing community at UCF. As an undergraduate, I caught glimpses of this community through fiction workshops, but other than the advice offered by workshop participants and the comments of my professors, I was not participating as a writer in the larger social dialogue that was available. However,

upon starting my graduate coursework, I found myself amidst people my own age who were as serious about writing as I was, who took what they had learned as undergraduates to heart and were striving, like me, to produce great art. They were open to dialogue outside of the workshop, always eager to discuss issues of writing, books, and theoretical approaches. It was then that I began to get a clear picture of how diverse a community of writers can be and how necessary, all of us helping each other to achieve the greatest possible art while developing our own unique voices. I was fortunate to have the support of this community while working on this thesis, from conception to revision. I discussed theories and revision strategies with my peers and turned to them for help in beta-reading early drafts. And let us not forget the instruction of professors—all different with various approaches to the achievement of fictional effect, but all fixed on the same goal of helping me to find my own voice and not imprinting their own prejudices and ideas on the process. This thesis is as much a product of the community of teachers and fellow students as it is of my imagination.

Another element of the writing community that informed the thesis process was my work for the *Florida Review*. Serving on the magazine as an intern and as poetry editor affected my writing in the sense that it has helped provide me with a larger context, in the sense of the business and academic world, that my writing exists in. No one writes in a vacuum. Our writing comes from somewhere and passes to somewhere else. We often examine the formative experiences that shape our creative output—psychological hangups, resentments, preoccupations, curiosities, guilt, etc.—but I also see many writers who turn a blind eye to the writing world that they are stepping out into. Writing is an art, but it is also a business, and for those of us like me who seek teaching jobs at the university level, publication is the one big hurdle we have to jump. And while we shouldn't let concerns

about the reception and eventual placement of our writing cripple the process, I don't think we can be ignorant of the rest of the academic writing world.

Reading fiction and poetry submissions for *Florida Review* over the past several years has helped hone my eye for details and hooks, not to mention the speed and accuracy with which I catch mistakes. Being able to turn that sort of developed attention on my own drafts is invaluable. Even more than that, though, working with *Florida Review* has exposed me to and made me aware of the many different voices in the literary magazine world and, through that, the different possibilities of fiction. Reading widely in the "lit mag" community has only further reinforced my conclusion that taking risks with language and structure is both welcome and commendable. It's also taught me what not to do, what roads not to take, which paths have already been well-trod and, glimpsed in the distance, the possibility of strange, new paths that need to be forged. My *Florida Review* experience has, in all these ways, helped me equip me both for the thesis experience and for the business of publication in the literary magazine world.

The most difficult part of the thesis process, and of my entire writing life, has to do with the concept of discipline. There are some writers—I know a few of them—who don't necessarily function by a concrete discipline, who when the mood strikes them sit down and write for several hours at a time and don't work again until they are ready. Unfortunately, if I attempted to work in this way, I would never finish the draft of a single short story, much less anything of collection- or novel-length. I have always been plagued in my academic life by a tendency to procrastinate and, though I have the basic desire to write, have become good at avoiding the blank page. It was through reading several books on craft—especially the first few chapters of *The Writing Life* by David Huddle—that the concept of discipline in my writing life really dawned on me. In his book, Huddle speaks of the period in his life

when he was the most productive and the most happy at his process—isolated and alone in a cabin, doing nothing but exercising, eating, writing, thinking about writing, and sleeping. No distractions, no diversions. After reading similar exhortations to discipline—“you must write every day”—in other craft books, I decided to give it a try myself. Just waiting until inspiration and determination struck me wasn’t getting me anywhere. Sitting down every day and writing for a set amount of words or time, whether I was in the mood or not—this was the only way I would produce the raw material needed to construct and revise my short stories. I set myself a goal of 1,000 words a day. Of course, half the time I produced drivel, entire sections that had to be cut or replaced in the revision stage. But just by working through the word count every day, starting at the beginning of an idea and pushing through over a few weeks to the end, I was able to get past my hangups and actually produce workable drafts. Also, because I produced so much, it made the revision process easier. I was less reluctant to cut out whole chunks of the draft, more motivated to whittle the lines down to the finest images and beats.

The process of revision itself I found to be both difficult and empowering. Before I began to revise the stories for my thesis, I had spent little time in my undergraduate and graduate career refining my revision skills. Sure, I could proofread a rough draft, cut out most of the clunker images, assemble scenes with something resembling momentum and heft, but revising workshopped pieces for my final portfolios was always done without much thought for myself. Before the thesis, revision meant taking the best and most sensible comments from the workshops and applying them directly to the manuscript. As I embarked on the process of thesis revision with my advisor, however, I came to understand that revision on this level requires more than simply plugging suggestions on diction and syntax into a draft. Revision lives up to its name, a “re”-vision, seeing the story again with

new eyes and cutting delicately away at the chaff until the diamond center of the story emerges; scarred and slightly flawed, but always bright. However, the hardest part of revision by far was *adding*: adding beats and hooks to a scene or expanding an underdeveloped but crucial beat, teasing out the right moment as one teases a rogue thread from a sweater. In the end, nothing made the process easier except to do it, to sit for periods of time at the computer in front of the Word document and really *look* at the story, attempt to hold the entire thing in my vision at the same time, feel out where the holes are, and patch them.

The most valuable part of the thesis experience, other than the completion of an actual book-length manuscript, is the crystallization of my ideas and philosophies about writing. This collection is titled *Two Blades Come Together*, taken from one of the stories. The phrase—“two blades come together”—is in essence my entire writing and storytelling philosophy summed up in a single phrase. Every story in the collection deals with one blade—a character—clashing against another blade—another character, a situation, sometimes both. Two blades coming together, as scissors do, or swords, for the purpose of incision or battle. Every story is a little war. This is the mark of a well-told tale. And at the end of the day, despite my aspirations to textual poetry and music, this is the ultimate goal of my writing: to make you lose yourself in someone else’s struggle, their tastes in your mouth, the first light of morning gleaming off their weapon, which you suddenly realize you hold in your own hand.

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