

HIDDEN VARIABLE

by

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ABSTRACT

Hidden Variable is a novel that blends linear storytelling with the novel-in-stories form. It poses questions about the nature of identity as well as the feasibility of personal power, particularly with respect to disorders of the mind.

Darla Pierson, the novel's protagonist, is a woman in crisis. She is steeped in self-loathing brought on by the knowledge that she has, in effect, become her dead father—a genius with an epic libido, habitually using and discarding people. Her father has another habit that Darla doesn't share: being struck by lightning. After the second strike kills him, Darla makes a conscious attempt to recreate herself. But soon the new Darla sinks into depression, and her act begins to crumble, damaging her and those around her. Throughout the years, she and her family members experience periodic clashes with nature, never fully realizing that sometimes the most powerful, most devastating opponent comes not from without, but within.

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There's something more to existence: at the level of atoms, at the level of universes. Even Einstein knew that quantum physics didn't tell the whole story—the unknown factors, the unpredictable consequences. It turns out, Einstein was right, but he didn't know the half of it.

--Richard Pierson

PROLOGUE

Electrocution runs in my family.

Before I was born, my great-great grandfather was killed in a field in Massachusetts, working on one of the first alternating current power lines—his fingers charred by a fallen aluminum-steel cable, the current travelling from his hand through his body to the ground. My brother Robert, at thirteen, tried to fry himself in the tub with a weather radio. Between my great-great grandfather and my brother was my father, who in the span of nine years was struck by lightning, twice. The second strike was the one that got him, but the first was the one I witnessed, slack-jawed.

We were at Streeter Lake, the only standing body of water in my small Connecticut town, Saxton. It was July, in the middle of an oppressive summer whose air was so thick you could feel the weight of it in your lungs. I reached toward Robert's lopsided castle for the plastic bucket and shovel.

"Go screw," he said. He was six, I was eight.

My mother slapped him on the knee, her teeth clenching, cat-eyes flashing. She did this whenever my brother said something inappropriate, which was often. "Robbie, *quit it*. You don't use that language."

“Well, I don’t want his stupid shovel anyway,” I said. “It’s contaminated.”

“You don’t even know what that means,” Robert said.

“Yes I do. It means *dirty*.”

“Well, duh. It’s been in the *dirt*.”

The small, gravelly beach became nearly empty as the day wore thin. A hot breeze rolled off the water and the distant sky warned of an approaching storm, cobalt blue turning black. My father was in the water about 200 feet away, as he had been all afternoon. His strong back soaked up the light, exposed flesh turning a deep brown, though it hadn’t seen the sun for months. He never came and lay on the towel that my mother dutifully set out, but instead swam mechanically to and from the buoys.

“I’m going to go swim out with Dad,” I said.

My mother’s eyes cast another warning. “Darla, you stay close to shore. And be quick, those clouds are coming in dark.”

“I wouldn’t go in the water,” Robert said. “There’s *giant leeches* in the water.”

“There’s so not leeches in the water,” I said.

“Fine. It’s your funeral,” he said.

“It’s your idiot imagination.”

I went to the lake’s edge. Back and forth went my father. He never tired, never rested. This was back when he could do no wrong, even when he did everything wrong. By the time I was in my teens his genius ceased to fill me with awe. I started to get a handle on his megalomania, but it was too late—I was well on my way to becoming him.

I dipped my toe in and shivered. For some reason the water was always cold, even on the hottest days of the year. I forced myself to wade in up to my knees, quickly losing feeling in my feet. I couldn't see clear to the bottom the way I could with some of the larger, ocean-fed lakes in New England, or any spring I'd later find in Florida. Rather, the water was muddy yellow and you had to close your eyes underwater or risk puffing up for a week. Something black and squishy floated beneath the surface and I chided myself because it was just a weed.

After ten full minutes my father swam past me and collapsed on the sand, panting, staring straight ahead at a fixed point on the horizon. He didn't say a word, so I got out of the water and sat next to him. I didn't speak because I knew better.

Finally his too-deep voice tumbled onto the breeze. "You should swim out there. It's invigorating."

"Mom says I can't. Too dangerous."

He nodded toward the tree line. "Maybe so."

He was silent for a minute more. Then he reached in his bathing shorts' pocket and pulled out a small black shell. "You know," he said. "This snail holds the shape of the universe." He traced the slimy shell's coils with his finger. "It's called a logarithmic spiral. It's found everywhere, from the reaches of galaxies to the arms of cyclones. People often call it a golden spiral, but they're wrong. That would be the true Holy Grail."

I nodded. To my father, everything needed to be larger than life. Snails weren't just snails—the small stood for the big, or it stood for nothing. The world to him was a series of puzzles and equations, and science was God. In his short life he became a renowned

mathematician and physicist. Back then he was the only person I talked about. When I finally had him pegged and for a long time after that, I didn't tell anyone he was my father.

"Well," he said. "What do you think?"

I tried to look thoughtful, as I believed you should when having a smart conversation about important things. "Yes. Definitely."

He smirked at me sideways. "Quick now," he said, turning the shell over and over in his hand. "If you had fifty-eight friends and you wanted to give them each sixty-nine shells, how many is that?"

"Four thousand and two."

"Pi to twenty digits?"

"Three point one four one five nine two six five three five eight nine seven nine three two three eight four six."

He nodded. "You're a good girl."

I beamed in his direction, but in an instant he was a million miles away, staring at a blond woman in a zebra-striped bikini swimming nearby. He smiled, not a smirk but a full-toothed grin. She waved and made a little splash, and I was back in the realm of the small.

I willed that my flushed cheeks would look burned as I wandered back to my towel. My mother didn't look up from her women's magazine. My brother picked up the sand bucket. By now, his gravelly castle had shovel-shaped smash marks and a dirty yellow moat. "What were you and Dad talking about?" he said.

"About pi," I said. "You wouldn't understand."

"Why were you talking about pies?" he said. "That's stupid."

I rolled my eyes dramatically. “Not pies, pi.”

“I don’t care.” He brought the bottom of the bucket down on the castle, flattening it. I relished every chance to show my brother up, the chubby, too-short-for-his-age boy who didn’t have an aptitude for math, like me or my father, or a brilliant flair for art, like my mother. *The surface runoff of our gene pool*, in his teens he would call himself, the quirk of genetics making him angry, in a way that got worse as he aged. “You’re stupid, for talking about it.”

I looked to my mother to rebuke him, but she was appraising my dad appraising the woman in the bikini. The woman had waded closer to him. He still wielded that dazzling smile. My mother turned away, never quite accepting my father’s affairs, never quite denying them. I never knew until much later how hard this was, her coming to the beach. She had a resignation about her, a determination to cling to existence, despite her tendency to avoid it. Even on beach mornings she labored over her makeup, desperately painting-on youth as if working the hundreds of watercolor canvases that had constituted her life.

Low rumbles radiated from somewhere in the distance. “The storm is getting close,” she said to me and my brother. “We need to go back to the car.”

Robert and I both complained, but she was firm, ushering us in rounding up towels and lotion and toys. With my arms full, I ambled away, looking back over my shoulder, toward the lake.

The woman floated on her back until a thunderclap sent her giggling out of the water. She headed off the beach with the rest of the stragglers. My father still sat in the spot where I had left him, watching her go.

After long seconds my mother stopped and turned toward my father. She shouted, but her tone was passionless. “Richard, a storm is moving in. Come on.”

He didn’t move. His sonorous voice echoed loud and cold. “I’ll be there in a second.”

The dark clouds quickly rolled over us, smothering the sky. My mother, who had said her piece, dutifully marched my brother and me back toward the car.

The trek was about a half mile long. We walked and walked, leaving the smattering of sand, reaching a barbeque area with thick grass and rotting picnic tables. A flash lit the sky and a crack rattled the ground. I turned instinctively around, but my father wasn’t behind us. We had crested a hill and all I could see was a pit of rusty grills.

“It’s just heat lightning, you big baby,” Robert said.

“What, exactly, is heat lightning?” I said, feeling uncomfortable that my brother knew something I didn’t. Sprinkles of rain pricked my arms, making me itch.

“That’s lightning in the heat, *duh duh Darla*. It can’t hurt you.”

My mother rarely got in the middle of our spats, unless one of us was cursing or spouting something blatantly false. “Robbie, heat lightning just means it’s too far away to hear the thunder. We definitely have thunder. Pick up the pace.” She swatted him lightly on the behind. “Or I’ll pick you up and carry you to the car.”

Robert hopped ahead of her reach, fleeing further humiliation.

We were halfway through a grassy field when the sky opened up. Rain spiked our faces, arms, backs. We ran. A thick mass of trees greeted us with a rotting damp smell. Rain-slapping-dirt sounds were replaced by rain-slapping-tree sounds, and we had to yell to hear each other.

Before the parking lot lay a path that snaked through fifty yards of dense brush. “What are you waiting for?” my mother shouted at me.

The soil of the path gave way to puddles of mud, which gave way to who-knows-what in the sudden darkness that hovered ahead. “Let’s go,” my mother said, and plowed forward. Robert reluctantly followed. I closed my eyes and rushed in next, my wetness pressing my clothes to me in a sticky film, slimy cold branches and limp leaves slithering on my exposed skin.

We jogged through the dark brush for a while. Then the granddaddy of all thunderclaps ripped through the heavens. I froze for a second, my heart leaping over itself. I dropped the towels and toys and turned and ran the other way, stumbling blindly, ozone filling my nostrils as I headed back toward the water.

Sometime around mid-field my mother must have noticed I was gone. She yelled after me, I think, but I ran fast, rain spikes piercing my chest and face. When I reached the beach I peered through the tempest to my father’s lone form. He was still sitting there: arms thrust behind him, palms to the sand, face to the sky. I called out, but nothing sounded but the rain and the wind and the low hum of background thunder. The flash, when it came, was brighter than a thousand suns, a bloodless brilliance that washed out trees and turned the heavens a deathly white. He slumped backward and my guts twisted but he didn’t end, so neither did I. Not yet.

POKER

My husband Gregg invited me to play in his poker game exactly once. Every Tuesday night he and his work cronies smoke cigars and chug beers in my parlor, and one night four years ago he saw me idly watching television and asked if I'd like to sit in. I had never played poker before. This happened toward the beginning of our marriage.

We played a few hands so I could learn the ropes, and suddenly Gregg meant business. He raised and raised until the pot was over a thousand bucks. At one point his friend Jason looked at the community cards face-up on the table, then folded and winked at me. "Your boy's insane. He's gotta have something good."

There was only a six-percent chance he had *something good*. I couldn't help but count the cards in my hand and the cards dealt face-up, and when I processed the hand combinations and permutations and the tiny shift of his bottom lip, I knew I had better cards than he. Genetic codes are hard to break. I brought the pot to two grand.

Gregg looked as if he was humoring me, kept throwing in chips, his cigar soggy and limp in his mouth. "You'll learn that this is a quick way to go broke." His friends made whooping noises with each round of bets.

Jason dealt the remaining cards.

"What've you got?" Gregg said.

I had three kings to his pair of fives. I won, that game and the rest of the others that night. Gregg swallowed his surprise with his beer and never invited me to play again.

Since then, little things have been off with us, here and there.

Gregg used to bring his work home, vent out loud because his broker boss gave him an impossible deadline or his spreadsheet numbers didn't add up. One day, I brought him a coffee, looked over his shoulder, and helpfully pointed out that the error in Worksheet D, cell D6, caused a miscalculation on line 5,433 that put his base estimate off by 26 dollars, multiplied over six years to \$8,122.

"I thought you dropped out of high school?" he said.

"I did," I said.

What I hadn't told him was that I didn't flunk out, in fact turned down eight scholarships before they booted me for having an affair with the (soon-to-be former) Assistant Vice Principal.

Gregg's mother says that Gregg's first wife was *full of light*. I am made of something darker. The Gregg who met me, after the sultry, bloated Saxton summers had faded, in a Coral Gables country club reinventing myself as a sweet, average woman, is starting to suspect the truth. If not the truth, *something*.

The clock on the wall reads exactly 9:00 PM, and I am snacking, spread out on my couch in the living room. Tonight is Poker Night.

Gregg and his work cronies are once again in my parlor, and they have been playing for three hours. Four years and three hours. Two million, one-hundred-two thousand, five hundred and eighty minutes. One hundred twenty-six million, one hundred fifty-four thousand and eight hundred seconds. The new me doesn't think on this level, so I try to concentrate on gardening, or baking, or whatever else the neighborhood wives fuss about. I try not to focus on the buzzing of the bulbs in the lamps flanking me, try not to imagine the current searing through, fingertip to fingertip.

All of my furniture is white. We have a white couch, white chairs, white daisies in a white vase on an off-white rattan coffee table, with looped off-white legs. We purchased it all right after our wedding. Gregg bought our five-bedroom Mediterranean-style home after his wife took everything in the divorce. He never really had the desire to furnish it, except for a 42-inch plasma TV, some stereo equipment, and one plain white couch in the center of the room. The couch was probably made to be slipcovered, but he left it bare.

Once we said *I do*, he took me to one of those showrooms with grand picture windows and a wall of water and we feasted our eyes on all of the leather and rattan and silver and chrome. Gregg raised his arms in a grand gesture and grinned, his teeth white as the day streaming in from outside. Gregg is a solid man, steady—competent if predictable from boardroom to bedroom. Occasionally, though, whimsy takes over and his face is like a kid's with a bucket of Play Dough, all smiles and possibilities. "Anything you want," he said.

I hadn't a clue about furniture. All the ottomans and occasional tables and bistro sets swirled together into one, big, over-important yard sale. "Do you like this?" Gregg would say, concerned. "Or this?" I panicked, went back to my frame of reference, that bland, lonely couch in the center of our living room. "What if we get stuff to match what we already have?"

Gregg was thrilled. His one furniture purchase was going to be spun into a theme. I picked out a white, overstuffed chair, and a series of white lamps. The result was pretty, if sterile, and I had to buy a lot of plants to keep the place from looking like a hospital. Gregg was proud, and I had to admit, so was I. We'd sit on our white furniture and sip lemonade and laugh and he'd put a hand on my knee. He and his pretty, simple young wife who decorates.

Out the window, our front yard is dark, expansive, quiet. The sprinklers mist the Zoysia with fans of water. In the parlor the gray, masculine banter rises to a din, and the walls rise up around my plate of cold, gelatinous goose liver pâté.

Gregg and co. are laughing, talking about brokerage fees and buyouts like they do all day, the subject never tiring them. I pick up some knitting needles from the side table. The new me knits.

I lean back on my white couch and do fifty-six purl stitches in a row. I doze off, because Gregg is by my side, shaking me. The clock reads 9:15.

“Darla. Get up.”

“What is it?”

“Why don’t you go to bed, if you’re not feeling well?” His eyes are bright with concern. Tonight was the neighborhood wives’ weekly shopping excursion. I’d never before missed a single handbag sale or chattering martini lunch.

“I’m getting on just fine out here.”

“You’ll be more comfortable upstairs.”

“I’m fine.”

His friends have likely started asking questions. They already don’t know what to make of his peculiar, card-shark wife.

Gregg lightly brushes my wrist. “What’s wrong?” he says.

This morning my brother called. I’m not sure how he even found me. I didn’t make it to the kitchen in time and just like that, his voice was on the machine. “Darla,” Robert was saying. “Let’s talk.” We haven’t spoken since two days after I turned eighteen. Soon afterward I took off

without a word, eventually ending up in Florida, but that day he proclaimed me the Devil. Now, he wants to save me. It's the only possible explanation. My aunts moved to Minnesota ten years ago and are gung-ho with their new Midwestern values, so they steer clear of me. My mother withdrew from my life when I was a teen, and I never knew her sister. Our grandparents are all dead. Robert's the only one left with the power to ruin everything. I deleted the message.

"Nothing is wrong," I say.

His black brows furrow into a knot. "Nothing?"

"Nothing."

He looks down at the floor. "Why don't you go to bed, then, if you're going to go to sleep?"

Gregg and I dated for three months before marrying. He met me five years ago as a simple, uncomplicated woman—a woman who lived to hear about his days finding business-types with properties to sell and business-types to buy those properties and making no more earth-shattering changes to the world than the order of names on a deed. This woman existed, because I needed her to. She exists now, despite what her crazy God-fearing brother says.

"Can I sit in?" I say.

"What?"

"Poker, can I sit in on your game?"

He laughs, thinks I'm kidding. He squeezes my wrist, gently. "Sweetie, you tried that and didn't like it." Somewhere through the years the truth has become that I don't play anymore because I didn't enjoy myself. His humorless smile tells me he thinks this is a terrible idea. He's

searching for an acceptable reason to turn me down, one that won't make him feel like an asshole. "Are you sure you don't have some sort of fever?"

"Please," I say.

His face goes dark and guarded, but he doesn't push his objections further. He's never been able to turn me down, for anything. "Fine," he says.

I walk into the parlor, five sets of glazed-over crony eyes studying me. "Darla's gonna play," Gregg says evenly.

A tipsy, fat businessman with a mealy face I don't recognize starts laughing, a thick, sloppy chuckle. "Faaaantastic," he says. "Now we can finally stop losing to *Gregg*." The rest of the cronies snicker, wisecracks about Gregg's emasculating wife spilling forth into the room with an air of familiarity. Gregg rams his hands into his pockets and smiles thinly.

The fat businessman asks me what I want to play.

"I don't know," I say.

"I hear Holdem's your game."

"No," I say. "I've just been lucky before."

The man deals, lets out an oily breath. "Wish I had that kind of luck."

I'm careful not to pay close attention to too much in particular. I especially don't notice that these men are in crisp suits even though it's evening and the boardroom has been dim and silent for hours. I try to make eye contact with Gregg, but his gaze is riveted to his hand.

I open a can of beer and down a swig to help me not-concentrate on my cards, an ace and a ten. The friends are staring at me, new cronies and old cronies alike probably wondering if I

will humiliate my husband again. My cards give me a statistical advantage, so I quickly think about Gerber daisies and muffin tins, and fold. This action is met with confused stares all around.

Jason shovels a handful of pretzels in his mouth. “She must be ramping up,” he says. “Giving us a false sense of security.” Jason is the only crony who is a holdover from that night years ago, and he’s relishing this moment too much for him to not be the purveyor of all the rumors.

“Just had some bad cards,” I say, smiling sweetly.

The room is starting to breathe, air molecules pulsate, walls lose their form. My brother’s face, glowing and cherubic and Godlike, floats in the sour cream and onion dip. He’s ready to spill the full truth to everyone, to unveil me as a sham, a pathetic reincarnation of my father, my real father, the man I don’t allow myself to think about. Someone entirely different from the fictitious librarian from Albuquerque.

Cards slap the table. The hand is over, and Gregg has won. He’s bluffed through a pair of sevens. A grin spreads slowly across his face. His friends groan. I could have told them that he was full of shit, since he tends to swirl his scotch in his mouth an extra beat when he’s thinking too long. “Guess you should have stayed in,” the fat businessman cracks to me. I would have won, no question, as there is another ace in the community cards on the table. “No, I had nothing at all. I’m not such a great bluffer.”

My husband eyes me sharply, but allows a smile. “Great poker takes years of practice.”

I nod. “Snacks are getting low.”

In the kitchen I slam another beer. I return to the table, set down new bowls of pretzels and dip, and fold and hit at will. I bet big on a pair of threes, then drop out of the hand entirely. Gregg slams the rest of his scotch and wins two more rounds.

Obviously I'm throwing the games, but the cronies are too drunk to notice. Gregg looks around the table with glassy eyes and a hint of pride. To his friends, the stories of my prowess have been greatly exaggerated, and I've become just another sweetly foolish wife. His is a world of alpha and beta males, and he's gained back his standing as top dog. I've met some of their own wives; any illusions of superiority the men experience in their marriages have been carefully crafted for them.

The table banter turns back to work. Jason wins a hand, a man with a blonde comb-over wins a hand. Gregg looks at me, finally. He's on to me. His face softens a little, the resentment losing out to scotch and a tiny bit of gratitude.

I exhale through my beer buzz and let the tide of mergers and buyouts and takeovers sweep them away. After a few more rounds of hitting and staying and betting and checking, of loud cronies and silent me, Gregg wins the pot. He slurs through a victory speech and I am elated.

"I gotta piss," he says. He wobbles to his feet and leaves the room.

I push out my chair and the reins on my tongue loosen. "When a man's gotta piss, he's gotta piss." I climb to my feet. "Thanks for the ass-kicking, gentlemen. That's what I get for blowing off shoe shopping with the Stepfords. Excuse me." I wobble away, trying to stay steady and force some dignity, despite reeking of Heineken.

I go out to the porch for some air. My head is spinning, and for the first time this evening, I'm enjoying the ride. When I sit down on the swing, I land on a pack of cigarettes someone has left next to a lighter. I quit smoking when I made up my mind to marry Gregg, after talking my way into a country club and watching him, this well-groomed man at his table for two, cutting his grandmother's venison tenderloin for her—into tiny pieces—with a butter knife. None of that matters, because in my current state I see no reason not to have a Marlboro moment. As I'm desperately sucking in smoke like it's oxygen, Gregg's friend Jason comes outside, walks in front of me. He turns around.

"That was some shit-poor poker playing," he says with a smirk.

I sober up a bit. "Yeah," I say. "Guess I've still got a lot to learn."

"Seems like you already know a lot about stroking a man's ego," he says.

So he knows tonight was a sham. I had hoped he would think it was all luck, vast swings of good and bad.

I should worry, but I'm more concerned about the support beams that roll and sway and threaten to dislodge the roof. I try to steady myself, to focus on something. For the first time, I really look at Jason. His face is pallid, and he's smaller, less built than Gregg, with skinnier arms. His eyes seem to be green, with wiry threads of gold. The pointed look there I recognize, being one I've traded with many men, years ago, in my past. Does he know that about me, too?

I look up, and my brother rises to the heavens, his sylvan wings gently shaping an image from the clouds, a fluffy portrait of me fucking Robert's best friend in Robert's bedroom while he's at school. *You're drunk and irrational*, I think; Jason sweeps his gaze over my body and I decide that this is the simple, bald-faced lust of a man who's enough of a dick to hit on the wife

of his partner while his partner's on the other side of the door. I flush in spite of myself. The darkness breaks open and spreads from my pores to the night sky. The streets of my neighborhood are silent, dim. Meticulous, manicured lawns shrouded in gray.

"I've gotta go. I guess I'll see you around," Jason says, looking around, back at me.

There is question implicit on his face, in his words. I'm a good wife. I have sex with Gregg once a week, not just dutifully, but eagerly. The new me doesn't entertain the thought of rutting around with strangers. Strangers with green eyes with wiry threads of gold. I form the image of Gregg in his wedding tuxedo in my mind, but can't help flashing Jason a full-toothed smile. "I guess so," I say, stubbing out my cigarette on the arm of the swing. He grins. I almost throw up.

A mosquito flies into the zapper and expires in a shock of blue light. Jason looks for a second like he's about to walk toward me. Instead he glances around, suddenly unsure. Maybe he has a flash of conscience. Maybe he's biding his time. "Well, better get going," he says. He turns and disappears down the steps into the pale, sleeping neighborhood.

In the ninth grade, before he found God, my brother got a hold of my diary and wrote "SLUT" on every page in my Bubble-gum Pink lipstick. The next day, I took his Biology textbook and wrote "JEALOUS?" in black marker on every single page.

"Wait," I call. My husband's friend Jason stops, turns around. The pallid air brushes my skin, the neighborhood exhaling the hot breath it's been holding forever.

SUMMER

Darla bites her Popsicle full on—freezing her teeth, creating a delicious pain in her jaw, the kind you only get in summer. Purple syrup runs down her throat but mostly onto her hand, her arm, the grass. She sweats through her new robin’s-egg-blue one-piece. She is sticky, itchy.

She is hiding from the baby, in her spot in the backyard beneath the honeysuckle, its fragrance strong, exhilarating. What’s left of the Popsicle falls into her Barbie Dream Pool, a dirty iceberg tinting the water a muted puce.

The baby is with their mother. Ever since he was born, she has been by his side nonstop—when he cries, or laughs, or takes a step, or shits. “It’s ‘cause he’s a baby,” their mom says. “You aren’t a baby anymore, Darla.” Darla agrees. She is no baby. Sure, she plays with Barbies, but Barbies are grown-up, elegant.

Barbies have angled cheeks and long necks and sparkly dresses. Barbie and Skipper and Ken have a whole closet full of fancy party clothes, which they wear in polite company. At heart, though, they are nudists. Barbie is skinny dipping in the Popsicle water. Darla dunks Barbie’s head. Ken stands behind the Dream House, up against the barbeque grill, wearing only his apron. Last week, Darla painted Ken’s plastic hair red using nail polish. Darla gets bored easily. Yesterday, she replaced all the furniture in the Dream House with her mother’s Hummels, pillar candles, and crystal goblets. She made a water fountain in the living room with her dad’s nasal spray.

A mosquito hovers in front of her face and finally lands on her arm. She waits, holds her breath. Almost immediately, she feels the pinch, a thin sliver of pain. The experiment is over, as she instinctively closes her hand on the bug, disgusted, splattering her own blood across her pale

skin. She wonders about death, what it's like to be *dead*. Mangled legs and splattered insides, she decides.

She knows thirteen people who are dead. Her mother's grandparents, her mother's father, her mother's sister, her father's grandparents. With them, she doesn't know why. With the rest, she has been given reasons. Her father's father's father touched a broken telephone line and burned through like a hot coal. Her former neighbor, Mrs. Czecklee, choked on a big hunk of steak. And her father's uncle's heart stopped beating last month, quivering for a little while before going still. "Bad wiring," her father said, like with a toaster that sometimes lights bagels on fire. Bad wiring runs in her father's side of the family. She wanted to see if her great-uncle had a black cord sticking out of him with frayed ends, or a thick black crust, but her mother wouldn't allow her to go to the funeral. "She doesn't need to know about death yet, Richard," she said. "She's four. She can wait to grow up."

"She's a mature kid, she can handle it," was her dad's reply, which didn't do any good, in the end, because she still had to stay home with a neighbor. Her dad is the smartest man in town but he doesn't know the half of it. Darla reads every book in the house, from *TV Guide* to *Better Homes and Gardens* to her dad's textbooks, and her parents think she's adorable and imitating her father and advanced beyond her years, but they don't know what she doesn't tell them. That she brands the words onto her brain, the specific pattern of loops and ridges seared into soft wet tissue. If meaning is elusive at first, she can try to make sense later, recalling phrases, lines, whole pages, write them in vapor in the sky, allow them to drift before her eyes. Then there's the thing with numbers. This part is beyond the reach of her father, even. She adds up the groceries in her mom's cart and knows the total before the cashier hits the button, knows how many

seconds make up a year, a decade, a century. Finally, she knows way too much about babies, like where they come from. They come from *boys*. Her friend Marcy's sister has a baby, and Marcy's mom tells Marcy whenever she kisses her boyfriend *like that* she'd better stop or she'll balloon up with another one. Once in a while Darla's father kisses her mother *like that*, and sometimes her father secretly kisses strange ladies *like that*, and Darla cries in her room because she doesn't care for babies and her father is fixing to give one to just everyone. Finally, she realizes inconsistencies with her mother. Her mother wants Darla to stay in some dizzy state of maturity, to switch between baby and grown-up, whenever it suits her own needs.

Darla lowers Ken into the pool, apron and all. "Don't be a shit," she says. "You spend too much time at the grill." The apron turns puce. "Serves you right," she says.

She is hot and bored so she goes inside. Her mother is in the kitchen, pouring Cheerios in front of Robbie because it's one of the few things he'll eat. He picks one up and squeezes it, throws it on the floor. He smiles at Darla, his chubby pink cheeks covered with drool. She wonders if babies can have bad-wiring like uncles, can be here one minute, gone the next.

"Darla, I thought you were going to be out there all day." She looks Darla up and down. "You need a bath."

"I don't need a bath."

"No, huh? Did you eat a popsicle, right before dinner?"

She is about to say no, but her arm is too purple for such subterfuge to work.

"I didn't finish it all."

"Is that blood, on your arm?"

Darla catches a strange look in her mother's eye, so she changes tactics. "I'll swim and clean off."

"We can all swim," her mother says, exhaling. "It's so damn hot out today."

"Babies can't swim."

"He's got a floaty, Darla."

"I don't need a floaty."

"No, you certainly don't," her mother says, shoveling a spoonful of fruit mash against Robbie's closed mouth, so it all ends up on his face. "You both need a hosedown, right Pumpkin?" Darla can't figure why she asks him questions. He never talks. Marcy's sister's baby talks. Robbie frowns and throws another Cheerio on the floor.

Darla waits while her mother recruits their father and they both put on their suits, and she waits some more while her mother readies Robbie with his rubber diaper and sun hat. She hops from foot to foot, becoming itchier and hotter by the second. As she scratches her arm, a small welt forms under the skin.

When her family is ready she heads out the back door ahead of them, into their backyard. They have one of those octagon-shaped, hard-plastic above ground pools, usually only part-way full, with stairs and a small deck. The only time the neighbors come over is to use the pool, to drift around in tubes, laughing, with tipped *high-balls* in their hands. She regrets not bringing Barbie and Ken for a swim. They would have had to wear suits, because her mother doesn't approve of their lifestyle.

#

The sun feels good on Kate's shoulders. Going to the pool was a fantastic idea.

Kate has initiated this activity to strengthen her family, since she needs this family like she does food, air. Her mother now lives out of state, in Ohio. She dotes on Kate's kids, and she used to fuss over Chloe, but her own relationship with Kate has always been cordial, yet cold. Plus, Kate's no longer able to just pick up the phone and call Chloe when things get bad. Things are indeed bad. The loss of her sister was crushing, but her marriage is more of a slow squeeze, the pressure from all sides forming her world into a marble, a bead. Kate and Richard were teenagers when they started dating, and he was strange, exciting, his brain a carnival of wonders that she couldn't fathom.

Her little cherub is strapped into his duckie. He's looking at her, and she enjoys the way that she is his whole world. She almost lost him. He was two months early, and in the womb he twirled with abandon until the cord encircled his neck three times. Her tiny, underdeveloped miracle was blue, but the doctors worked swiftly. Almost losing him caused Kate's carefully-packed closet of panic to become a storehouse, in the space of a few seconds. When he was born, his father eyed him—for weeks, he watched, studied. They named him Robert, because, she told Richard, that name means bright, famous. Secretly, this was her childhood boyfriend's name—a kid with plain features and a shy disposition and a big heart. The name was a charm, she told herself, and it worked. Her son turned out to be a wonderfully average baby and she wouldn't change this for anything, even if it means Richard sometimes frowns when he holds him.

Damn it, Darla. How long can a little girl possibly hold her breath? The girl is anything but average. She is fearless, like her father, with an arrogance born from intuitive understanding and an impatience born from waiting for the rest of the world to play catch-up. She has the soul of Goliath, but the fragile, gangly body of a colt. Kate has had enough. She drags her upright.

Darla pushes off her, gasps. She breathes heavily through her nose, which is semi-clogged with water. Kate can tell she wants to take another big open-mouthed gulp of air, but Darla won't give Kate the satisfaction. Richard is positively beaming. Kate is a little afraid of her husband, and she's a little afraid of Darla. The girl is every bit like him, nothing at all like Kate. Kate fears that underneath, beneath the big blue eyes and tiny body and fierce intelligence, something isn't right with her daughter.

Robbie creates a splash with his stuffed animal and Darla curses. Swearing has become yet another way for Darla to shock her parents, and Kate has had enough. She asks Richard to help, and he responds by throwing her in the pool.

He's laughing, being playful. She's angry, and wet. But, he's kissing her, and he hasn't kissed her in months. Kate melts into him, all thought escaping like the heat that radiates from her skin.

Darla emerges from the water and Kate sees from the corner of her eye that something is very, very wrong. Her cherub lies limp in Darla's arms and her first thought is *Oh my God. What has Darla done?* The panic moves through her, alarmingly swift. Richard picks up her world, places him gingerly on the deck. Robbie's not breathing. *He's dead, he's dead, he's dead.* Richard turns him over and pats him on the back.

Darla is standing in the water, mute. "Go call 911, now," Kate says as her heart thunders away, wondering why her daughter isn't moving faster, wondering how her own voice is so calm. Calm isn't right, she thinks. She should scream. If she screams, the paramedics will hear her and come running. If she screams, the God that she's not sure exists will forgive her for thinking these things about her daughter.

#

Richard is high. He's starting to come down, since he smoked the joint two hours ago behind one of the labs, with a young girl from one of his classes who has dense freckles on her neck and all along the top of her tits. It's a celebration! He's celebrating his success. It's coming together, his theory of creation—the beginning of everything: matter, energy, life, time. The vocabulary of his trade is wild: wormholes, quantum fluctuations, singularities. His dialect is wilder: parallel universes, quantum realities. His heart is beating frantically, and with each beat a universe is born inside his head, tiny explosions of light.

Some in the science community say he is crazy. Some say he is brilliant. His equations are extreme, provide mind-bending but plausible solutions. Through careful calculations he is answering questions that people have asked since the beginning of time. *Where do we come from? Why are we here?* Strings of numbers are his incantations and he makes God appear out of cosmic dust.

His wife, daughter, son, are here. He feels the impulse to enjoy them, feels a tingly heat permeating through his chest. Kate seemed surprised when he agreed to come swimming. Good, he likes to surprise! He's unpredictable, in a way his own father never was. He climbs the ladder to the pool.

Darla jumps into the water, without even testing it first. He sees flashes of himself in her, a boldness, an intelligence. Even when she was a newborn, she held his eyes, didn't turn away like other babies he'd met. She is going places, like him, so he encourages her to follow every interest—no matter how trivial—being careful not to exhibit even the slightest hint of his own

parents' jealousy and pettiness. He tries to find signs of brilliance in Robert, but the baby is silent, clingy.

She is under water, holding her breath, setting a record. He feels a surge of pride. She is going places.

Kate is complaining again. In the beginning of their marriage, he tried to set her fears at ease, but he's given that up. *Jesus, she is tense.* The whole damn world is too tense. He feels mischievous, young. Impulsive. He jumps in the water, catches her from behind, kisses her on the mouth. She struggles for a second, submits. It's the heat, or the drugs, or her otherworldly beauty, but for a moment he feels electric, something igniting between them that was extinguished long ago.

Then, he's being shoved backward. He's stunned, furious. Then, frozen. Scared. Darla's holding his son. His son has drowned, *drowned.* He tries to climb out of his marijuana-induced tunnel, but his vision shrinks to a dull, thudding point. He leaps forward, grabs Robbie. Turns him over, lays him on the deck, tries to clear the airway. He knows CPR, maybe. On a toddler, it's different. He thinks he's supposed to use two fingers. Science, logic take hold, and he counts *one, two, three,* breathes, counts *one, two, three,* breathes.

#

He likes floating.

Whether through the air in the arms of his mother, or even through the water in the belly of this weird, bloated duck. Floating is better than walking.

When they stand him on any hard surface, he responds by walking a little, but mostly by falling and bruising. Then he cries like he's being throttled. In the pool, there is no falling and no changing colors and no crying.

He splashes near his mother's leg. This is a clear signal. *Pull me though the water.* Recently, Robbie has discovered something magnificent. He has magical powers. More specifically, the ability to bend people to his will. Well, so far, just his mother.

When he pees, she brings a diaper. When he cries, she lifts him up. He uses this mysterious gift of wish-fulfillment to his advantage. He splashes again. *Pull me through the water, now.* She doesn't move. Are his powers weakening? He hugs his stuffed tiger, which is sopping wet. It doesn't have any influence of its own, but it brings its own assets to their team since its fur is quite soft. It usually feels good against his skin, especially when wet on a hot day. Now, he takes no comfort. The pool has become hostile.

He closes his eyes and pictures himself in his crib—looking up at the red and orange mobile spinning around and around—but when he opens them he's still in the water, and his mother is smiling at him stupidly. His powers aren't just weakening, they're gone. Maybe his mother's powers are stronger? He eyes her for a long while.

He jumps in place, up and down and up and down, but he can't move, much. This duck better back off. His sister emerges from the water. He throws his tiger at her. Darla says something and his mother says something and they're both frowning. Now his father is in the water, pawing at his mother. What is going on? He didn't wish for any of this. Tears well up and in an instant his chest burns. He is scared, then he is vague shapes and streaks of light, then he is darkness. When he wakes, he is pain. His belly hurts and his eyes hurt and his arms hurt. There

are strange men standing around. His mother and father and sister aren't looking at the men—they're staring at him, and for a brief time he believes his powers have returned.

#

Darla climbs the steps onto the deck and immediately jumps into the water, dropping under the surface, enjoying the shock of cold, swimming eyes-open to the wall, enjoying the burn, feeling alive. She stands and wipes her face, her father's blurry form climbing into view, all lean and golden. He takes a seat on the deck. Her mother carries the baby, who's bewildered, jammed into his floaty. She sends the Robbie-floaty hybrid to sea and descends the stairs, gingerly steps into the icy water. It reaches just to her thighs, but she doesn't frown, her red lips remain turned up just so. She wears a hot-pink two-piece with pearls on the straps and a gold chain around her neck that flashes the sun in Darla's eyes. She is beautiful, graceful. Darla's parents are living dolls—perfect, unaffected.

Robbie desperately clutches his favorite stuffed animal, a powder-blue tiger, looking around wide-eyed. Before, Darla had thirty-seven stuffed animals, but when her mother declared her grown up, Darla threw them all in the river. Grimace and Teddy Ruxpin and Garfield and a host of others began their journey downstream, purples and browns and oranges bobbing up and down and up and down.

“Dad,” Darla says. “Last time I did two whole minutes!”

“That's my big girl!” he says, lifting his head to look at her. “Guinness should be calling any day.”

“No. The record is six minutes. I need more practice.”

“If you practice any more it'll be Child Services calling,” her mother says.

“She’s having fun, let her be. Isn’t that right, kid?”

“Here, watch,” Darla says, sucking air, dipping under before anyone can respond. Her lungs sit full against her ribs as she kicks out her feet, drifts to the bottom of the pool. Her mother’s legs are blue, with wavy lines of light. The baby’s legs chop the water, back and forth, back and forth, until her lungs burn, her vision dims around the edges. She wonders at that sensation. It appeals to her, tugging her, just for a second, as she’s dragged into the air, gasping.

Her mother has her arm. “Jesus, Darla that’s enough.”

“What did you do that for?” she says, still panting. Then, before waiting for an answer: “How long was that?”

“Three and a half minutes,” her father says, grinning.

“You’re going to *drown yourself*,” her mother says.

Darla is keyed up, on edge. The baby throws his tiger in the water, spraying Darla with droplets.

“Don’t be a shit!” Darla says, even though she’s already wet.

“Darla,” her mother says. “Richard, do you believe your daughter?”

“Dial it back, Kate, you’re blowing a gasket.”

“Will you get involved, *please*?”

“I’ll *show you* involved.” This latest squabble ends with him rising from his chair, jumping into the pool, grabbing her mother from behind. He lifts her out of the water, throwing her in. She yelps as she falls face first. “Is this involved enough for you?” he says, laughing.

As she emerges, wet, red-faced, mouth open, he kisses her on the lips. Darla is dumbstruck. *This better not lead to more babies.*

In the midst of the commotion, the floaty floats by. It is empty, the strap drifting on the surface in two pieces instead of one. Robbie is gone. Under the water. A thousand questions shoot through her lightning-fast brain—staccato bursts of thought, spanning a thousand years, a second. *Is this death? Is he dead, like Grandpa? Does he feel? Does it hurt? Did I wish this? Is he somewhere, nowhere?* When she dips under the water and comes up underneath him, his face is puffy and strange and his eyes are closed. She has no answers. Darla lifts him from the water. She has been under for a matter of seconds but this time her chest aches, and she doesn't know what to do and she feels like she couldn't do it if she knew anyway, and all of this she decides she doesn't like. In the split second before they move or speak her parents simply stare at her and then at Robbie, their mouths hanging slack.

NATURE

Chloe turned the corner onto a patch of slush and she knew it would happen, knew her rear tires would lose traction like that, the back of the car skidding to the right. She wasn't at all surprised when she overcompensated, forgetting to turn into the skid, instead jerking the wheel to the left. The car went into a dead spin and she screamed. The car slid over a six-foot embankment, the driver's-side door scraping the bark of a giant elm. Finally it righted itself and drifted to a stop amid a snowy field encased by trees.

Her hands shook and her heart thumped and darkness curled the edges of her vision. Her chest ached from navel to neck, from the seatbelt or too much oxygen. *Damn him!* she thought about her husband, snug at home in front of the fire. *He knows I don't drive any more. He knows it.*

Never again, she vowed. In the future she wouldn't let anyone push her beyond her comfort zone. Five years ago, right after they first met, he'd thought his young girlfriend's quirks were cute. He'd said, "Honey, when the sun goes down, you worry that it won't come up in the morning." Lately, he said things like, "You need to be reasonable, Chloe. Nothing will happen to you out there. Don't you want to be well?"

She did want to be well. But she'd think about wanting it so much that her heart would beat and beat and she could not for the life of her slow it down.

She snatched the walkie-talkie from the console and called his, which she'd made him take out of his truck and put on the coffee table. When he answered, she said, "Damn it, I ran off the road."

He coughed. "You what?" he said. "Are you hurt?"

“Can’t tell. Chest aches. Do you think I broke a rib?”

“Where are you?”

She studied the field outside—snow, maligned here and there with rocks and thin, stubby trunks—and the line of dense woods that edged it. “I have no idea. All these roads look alike.”

“Well, what do you see?”

“Trees.”

“What did you see *before* you went off the road?”

“More trees. No more road.”

“So,” he said, pausing to breathe. He stifled a sneeze. “Is the car stuck?”

“Snow’s pretty deep.”

“Just try.”

She pressed the gas. The wheels spun and the car lurched forward an inch, but it remained stuck.

“There’s no way I’d get up the embankment, anyway.”

“It’ll be okay,” he said, as he’d done thousands of times over the course of their marriage.

“It’s *not okay!*” she said. “Why did I go out in the first place? You’re not *that* sick!”

“Look.” His voice cracked, the way it did when he reined himself in to keep things light.

“Here’s the important question: How’s my car?”

Chloe paused, laughed. “You suck. You owe me a rental. *Blue Lagoon.*”

He promised to pick up *Blue Lagoon* or *Blue Hawaii* or any other movie about any other colors she wished. She apologized for not getting the cough syrup. He told her not to worry.

#

She'd given Steve her best description of her route, which was not much of a description at all. He instructed her to leave the car, climb up the bank, and stand by the road for the benefit of him and his fellow forest rangers.

The giant elm, streaked with Honda green, provided enough leverage for her to climb. For a half hour she waited, hopping from foot to foot, trying to stay warm. Contrary to the forecast, sleet fell, slowly at first, then with purpose. Cold pins pricked her face as Steve called back and admitted he couldn't find her.

“What about everyone else? You guys do this stuff *for a living*.”

“They're on it, Chloe.”

Her hands were numb. She asked Steve to hold while she pulled off a glove and examined her fingers. They were still pink, streaked near the creases with white. Whitish-gray would mean her extremities were shutting down, hoarding blood for her organs, beginning to die. She wiggled her fingers and placed her hand under her turtleneck and sweater and parka, against the skin of her stomach.

“I'm losing feeling.”

“Get back in the car,” Steve said. “Find a tree near the road, tie your scarf to it. I won't be long.”

#

Until today Chloe hadn't driven in four years. Soon after Steve married her and moved them from Connecticut to his birthplace in the mountains of Vermont, she found she couldn't do it anymore. Something about the unending snow or the lack of neighbors or the way the property markers rose up like tombstones meant she couldn't do much. Steve grocery-shopped and

clothes-shopped and went to the post office and the dry cleaners. His job was to protect the landscape, and he slipped right into doing the same for her. He never complained. He did ask her to take pills, though, which in the end just made her sleep.

She ran the motor and the windshield wipers while intermittently slamming the car into reverse, only digging the tires further and further into the earth. Ultimately she decided to conserve gas, even though the tank read three-quarters full. *How long does it take for hypothermia to set in?* Chloe wondered. Briefly she obsessed about the mold that grew from moistness and clogged the lungs.

She wrestled open a package of crackers from her purse and worried about the threshold for human starvation. Was it seven days? Dehydration, she'd heard, began at two. She sipped a bottle of water, her thoughts dwelling on a man she saw once in a movie who survived for two weeks on jujubes and sweat.

Chloe tried Steve but he didn't answer, so she switched the walkie-talkie off and on and off and on. Off, to save battery. On, to try him again. What must it be like in these parts *after dark?* Were there old, lonely woodsmen here? She locked the car doors.

The sun dipped over the horizon, and the wind picked up. Chloe dug out an extra sweater from her bag and randomly checked the rear windshield for signs of Steve or an armada of flashing lights. Occasionally she'd turn on the radio, get an earful about the *sudden Nor'easter*, then grow terrified and turn it off. For two hours she ran the engine, turning the heat up to get warm and down to conserve gas.

At around 3 AM she thought she saw a figure in the distance, a gigantic winged beast, complete with gnarled talons and a malformed head. It was a perversion of the hawks she'd seen on the nature shows that swoop down from nowhere and steal off with chicks.

Chloe flipped on the headlights. The cold beams revealed nothing, only foreground: a fit and fury of white pellets like an angry mass of insects. She dimmed the lights and for the rest of the night the hawk and dozens more returned, alternately railing against the sky and diving towards her car.

#

At the dawn of Thursday she awakened to her husband's frantic voice on the walkie talkie. "The wheels spun and spun," he said. "I was towed home." He said he had been driving for hours, even after officials called off the search because the roads were too dangerous.

"What do I do? My crackers are gone."

"You need to venture out yourself. Just go a few hundred yards, maybe find a house. Can you try?"

She tried, when daylight was fully upon her. She climbed up to the road, snow up to her knees, punching one leg then another through a thick skin of ice. The road was smooth and white, like a milky river. Not a single track, not from a car or an animal or a man.

Only a few purple threads of her scarf poked out from beneath lumps of white. She shook it off and re-tied it to the tree, splayed it out, patted it down, ridiculously, as if building the perfect snowman.

When she backed up a few feet to gain perspective, she faltered. Her boot sank into an unseen hollow, sending her to the ground, cold slamming her backside, legs, neck. She gasped at

the loss of breath and worried about spinal cord injuries. From that moment on she decided not to journey more than a foot from the car.

#

On Thursday afternoon, the Governor called a state of emergency. The snow had backed up to windows, covered shrubs, buried mailboxes. The radio said no one in the tri-county area could remember a time of so much incessant white.

A harried Steve coughed into her ear.

“Are you okay?” Chloe said, her voice quickening.

“Fine,” Steve assured.

“What do I do now?” she said.

“Sit tight,” he said.

He had rallied his friends, colleagues, outlying neighbors—everyone he could think of—into a search party, and they had been hunting for her on foot, since no vehicles could drive more than a few yards.

Chloe took the last sip of bottled water, picking at a hangnail until it bled on the old Honda’s mocha-crème seat cover. *Blood stains don’t come out of sheepskin*, she thought. *Blood loss will probably make me weaker. When does blood poisoning set in? The smell of blood attracts wild animals.*

“I’m going to be stuck here forever,” she said, her voice soft.

“I won’t let that happen.” His authoritative tone soothed through the walkie-talkie, tinny and small, but to her, it was the voice of a general, a god. It was both—the voice of her father,

who when she was little distracted her and her sister from summer storms. The rain was a howling beast breaching the walls of their room.

“It’s gonna get *you*,” said Kate. “You ate my Twinkie.”

“It’s going to get *you*,” said Chloe. “*You* ate my Twinkie!”

Chloe, unlike Kate, was filled with a dread as frightful as the sky.

“It’s going to get *no one*,” said their father, amused. “The Twinkies belong to *me*, and so do the punishments.”

After their father’s heart gave out, no one saved Chloe from monsters, until she met Steve.

#

On Thursday evening, Chloe saw a bear. Out the rear view mirror, behind the giant elm.

“Bears?” Steve said. “Really?”

The bear turned out to be a large outcropping of rocks.

“I could have sworn.”

She had become lightheaded.

She turned on the radio and listened to four-and-a-half hours of country music. She didn’t like country, didn’t like to dwell so much on such woe (she preferred show tunes, or adult contemporary, or pop). But the singers sounded friendly enough, and she remembered that Steve liked songs with strong messages and clear heroes.

#

For the whole of Friday the snow ebbed and flowed, each squall heavier than the one before. The short stubby trunks of the almost-trees morphed into large mounds that looked like

graves. Chloe ransacked a first-aid kit, cleaned herself with *Refreshing Moist Wipes*, which weren't so refreshing—rather, chilled her further amid the cold, stale air. She opened and closed her hands, which ached down to the bones. She thought of her mother, to whom she hadn't spoken in three years. Before Chloe moved away with Steve, her mother had begged her to stay.

“My gallstones,” she'd said. “I'm alone now.”

“Steve's got a cabin,” Chloe said. “He thinks it's best.”

“I'm not young anymore, you know,” her mother said.

“I know,” Chloe said, even though her mother had had them young, was young still.

When she'd got home, she told Steve what her mother had said.

“I've had a long day, Chloe. Your mother will be fine.”

Chloe had left Steve alone to unwind, silently climbed the stairs, and wondered if gallstones ran in families.

#

On the Friday evening, she fell asleep with the engine running. She awoke in the dark—sick, wondering if the snow had clogged the tailpipe and caused carbon monoxide to back into the car. Despite the chill, she opened a window, and every now and again she would thrust out her head, just to be safe.

#

On Saturday, she ran out of gas. The engine sputtered and spit and finally choked itself quiet.

The last time Chloe had talked to her sister, two years ago, she let it slip that she was afraid to drive.

“Don’t be silly,” Kate said.

“It’s true.”

“You don’t drive anymore?”

“No.”

Kate was shocked. “What twenty-year-old doesn’t drive? You were fine when you lived *here*,” she said.

“I know.”

“What are you afraid of?”

Chloe didn’t answer. She simply couldn’t explain, even to herself.

“You shouldn’t have left,” Kate said.

Chloe hadn’t answered, made some excuse about having to hang up the phone. She thought now that she would be fine if she had just listened to her family. Home, safe, in bed. It was Steve’s fault. All of it. He knew how afraid she was to leave her home. He stole her away anyway. Like Kate had said, she had known him for only a year. Kate’s own husband would never have suggested such a ludicrous move—he lived for his work in the city, the proximity to people, equal parts validation and distraction. The *distraction* part was what kept Kate up at night, and by extension, Chloe. If she had stayed, she might have been able to save Kate from him.

Chloe stared at the gas gauge for ten whole minutes, until she forgave her husband. “He loves me,” she said to no one. Then she alternately held her breath and blew ice spikes into the air. She did this over and over until the sides of her vision dimmed, thumped with her pulse.

#

At Saturday dusk, she talked to Steve. “Where. Are. You?”

“The bridge caved, the one that leads to the old Cray place. The old man can’t leave his house. The rest of us are still looking. It’s slow going—the snow’s turned to solid ice, so we get no more than a half-mile a day.” He let out a strangled sob. He was just exhausted, she reasoned.

#

On Saturday evening she talked to Steve for only a second. His cough sounded better. He had to go, because he was about to head out. “*To keep searching,*” he said. “Can’t you talk to me on the way?” she said, but he was already gone.

The doors had long since become jammed, so she took to climbing out her window: melting and drinking snow from the coin tray, wincing, willing away thoughts of bacteria that strained and multiplied as they slid down her throat.

#

At midnight Saturday, she woke Steve up.

“It’s okay, Chloe,” he soothed. “Shhhh, it’s okay.”

His voice was husky, foreign. The few octaves lost on the edge of sleep turned the familiar strange. She had developed a hollow pain in her stomach. “It’s so quiet,” she said, between breaths. “Not even birds.”

“They’re sleeping,” he said.

“Some birds sleep with one eye open,” she said. She’d seen that on a nature show once. “The side with the open eye, that half of the brain stays awake.”

The silence settled between them like the shroud of snow covering her car, the field, Earth.

#

At 4 AM Sunday, she learned that a Honda manual has thirty-seven instances of the word “torque.” At 6 AM she learned that laminated paper tastes like almonds.

#

At 10 AM Sunday the car battery began to die.

#

At 10:30 AM Sunday she took an old napkin from her purse, began writing a letter to her family: her mother, her sister. They were all-encompassing. She had cut them out of her life because she had to. Their troubles had lived, breathed through the phone, and it was too much for her to take. She put down the pen, crumbled the napkin. Out the window, the bear was on the hilltop. A hulking grizzly, brown-black against the stark white earth. How cold it looked. If she invited it into the car, maybe it wouldn't freeze to death in the snow, and she would know the true meaning of the word COMPASSION.

#

At 7 PM Sunday Steve said, “I'm sorry,” soft as a whisper. There was no more talk of searches, or bridges, or rescue. She said, “Do you remember our first date?”

“Of course,” he said, quietly.

“You won me a stuffed elephant.”

“It cost me thirty-five dollars. Was probably worth five,” he said, letting out a thin laugh that sounded more like a sob.

“You were marvelous. You held my hand as I carried that big pink elephant, walked me past all kinds of beautiful women, but you only had eyes for me.”

“You were beautiful,” he said.

“I wouldn’t go on any of the rides,” she said.

“I didn’t mind.”

“You love rollercoasters.”

“I loved you more.”

She couldn’t help but notice his slip. “I love you too,” she said, choosing her tense carefully, focusing on the last rays of light as the sun dipped below the horizon.

Steve’s sadness was palpable, but something else lived, between his breaths—a note in his voice, out of place next to the grief. A sad relief buzzed there, low and barely perceptible, alongside the wind that rustled the car and the heartbeat that drummed feverishly inside her head.

“See you soon,” she said.

“See you soon.”

Thin, icy snow smacked the roof, and the line of trees darkened.

#

At 3 AM Monday the bear returned, watched her with its hard, black eyes.

#

A long time later, it limped closer, fangs bared, saliva pooling on the snow. She pried open the window. Sunlight tumbled in, and it tumbled in after, through rays that seared her eyes. It stepped over her, landing on the passenger seat, smashing her against the dashboard so that there was no room at all for her to drive. “It’s yours now,” she said, leaving it behind, pulling herself out of the car, marveling at her good deed.

Chloe's boots slid here and there. On the tree, parts of the scarf had frozen together. Tiny ice pellets clung to the strands, refusing to crumble. She carefully pried them loose with white fingers that no longer felt numb, weren't hers anymore. She laughed at the strands, laughed at their liberation. She looked up, to miles and miles of trees and snow in all directions, the sunlight playing a trick on her eyes, making the white blanket look lovelier than she thought possible, sparkling like sequins or crystals or a hundred-thousand tiny diamonds. Chloe wrapped the scarf around her neck, worried that the fabric might drop her body temperature, rather than raising it. Again and again hail bounced off her cheeks. Alone inside her head for the first time, she made a decision. She straightened her coat and turned toward the road.

BLACKOUT

Yesterday, I made Gregg dinner. My mother's recipe. I fitted a chicken with garlic cloves and whole onions, and as the oven temperature climbed the muscle proteins shrank, forcing out water, but not so much water as to make the meat tough or dry. Gregg came home, ate my creation, patted his stomach, beamed.

I am the perfect wife all over again: the wife from the beginning of our marriage. I starch Gregg's shirts until the cotton fibers stand at attention, stiff and brilliant and white. Gregg is beginning to forget the Darla that sleeps on the couch all day, the Darla that forgets to wash her hair. He doesn't know why I'm a new woman. He just thinks I'm over my funk.

I clean the house from top to bottom, which is no small feat. Gregg tends to leave his dirty dishes in the sink for days, until mold forms and the smell overtakes the house. In the past, when the smell got bad, he would shoot me wounded looks. His mother gave him hospital corners and I was letting him down. He would take to rinsing the dishes himself, grumbling about having worked all day. He couldn't understand why I couldn't do *this one thing*. I couldn't explain it. Not to him, not to myself. I couldn't bring myself to touch the poison-water, if only because if the smell got on me I was convinced it would never leave.

After a while I started putting dirty dishes in the fridge. Right after we ate I hid them in the lettuce crisper, a place he wouldn't look. The bins got full. One day, I threw the dirty plates away. Hurling his mother's fine china into the dumpster, spaghetti strands flipping in the air. Then I went to Filene's and bought new ones. Every few days, a new set of flatware. The lady behind the counter started cocking a brow at me, confused.

I smiled sweetly. "Kids," I said.

Things are different now. New. I wash the plates from last night, and it isn't so bad. The water doesn't smell yet. Things are improving.

Gregg has started coming home earlier from work. He takes me to dinner, touches me possessively around the waist, orders me champagne. Last night he could barely keep his hands off me when he walked through the door. We are like newlyweds.

I tackle the bathroom. Mold infects the shower grout. It's not too bad, but it's enough to make the pristine tile look dingy. I scrub and scrub until the white shines through. I clean the sink and the floor, wash the towels. Soon the house looks like one of those fake homes in a magazine.

The clock in the kitchen reads 3 PM. Time to start planning dinner. Again. It's insane how much effort goes into planning and cooking meals. Once we're done eating, it's time for sleep and then immediately time for another meal. There're only so many ways to make breakfast interesting, since there're only so many ways to cook an egg. Poached, scrambled, over-easy, fried. Omelet, quiche, casserole. This morning I was so sick of thinking about eggs that I feigned indigestion. After Gregg left for work, I ate a soggy bowl of Cap'n Crunch.

I go into the study and sit at my laptop. Gregg bought it for me soon after we were married, even though I don't do so much in the way of real work, as far as his colleagues are concerned. Gregg always defends me. He's a good man. *She works hard keeping a good house*, he says. His mother brought him up well. I let him down in the past, in ways he knows about and in ways he doesn't. It won't happen again.

I surf the usual food sites. Nothing catches my eye, except maybe a potato casserole recipe, which I bookmark. I come across an article about molecular gastronomy. The science of

cooking—why butter browns, what happens to molecules when they're heated. Fascinating. I don't want to read it. It is absolutely not one of the sites I allow myself to visit. The new me isn't supposed to know the reasons behind things, only the things themselves, and only certain things at that. Like, for instance, how to be a good Coral Gables housewife. That's how Gregg knows me, that's why he loves me. I'm simple, I make sense.

I read on. I can't look away. One article. Harmless, really. Roasting foods brings on a Maillard reaction, which causes proteins and sugars to break down and produce melanoidin, which is what builds a crust. Part of me wants to tell Gregg. But Gregg doesn't want to know why his chicken tastes crisp and delicious, and he doesn't want me to know, either.

He is a good man: solid, kind. He is just old-fashioned, believes women should do household things, know less than their husbands. More and more it's becoming hard to think about Gregg without examining him in stark relief. He is the polar opposite of my father. Memories of that man arrive unannounced, uninvited, and I entertain them for longer than I should before forcing them away. He would have slapped me if he knew what kind of woman I am pretending to be. "You're brilliant, Darla," he said to me often, right up until his death. "You can do anything."

"I don't want to do *anything*," I said, finally, when I was seventeen, three weeks before his death.

He laughed, surprised, his expressive eyes growing wide. "Why would you not want to rule the world? You're me, you're just like me. Someone needs to inherit the earth when I'm gone."

"I thought the meek inherited the earth."

“That’s what we tell them. They’re fragile. It’s what makes them easier to dominate.”

I print out the casserole recipe as Gregg comes through the front door.

“Darla?”

I greet him at the door, the good wife. I kiss his cheek. “How are you?”

His face is flushed, exuberant. “You’re not going to believe the day I had. Jason and I were magnificent, *brilliant*. We sold the Meyers building, to that out-of-town investor. He was hedging, but Jason would talk him up, ask about his wife, shit like that. Distract him. Then I came in, all business. Made him think he was passing up his future. It’s going to net us *millions*.”

Gregg thinks he and Jason are the Starsky and Hutch of corporate real estate. Yin and Yang. Like brothers, since Gregg’s an only child.

“That’s wonderful,” I say and mean it. Gregg’s eyes are lighting up in the way they do, like a boy’s—as if he’s gotten a new set of Tinkertoys, or a pony. He beams from the inside out.

“Do you mind if Jason joins us for dinner? I know it’s short notice. I’m sorry, I should have called earlier. We were just in it, you know, the rhythm and all. If it’s too much trouble I can call and cancel.”

His brows rise into a cartoon arch. He smiles, because he will get his way. Two weeks ago Jason had me breathing heavy, pressed up against the neighbor’s side door, bewitched by foul vodka breath in a kind of ecstasy that felt like drowning. “Sure, of course. I can set an extra place.” Acids in my stomach start to dissolve me from the inside out.

“Darla, you’re the best.” He smiles at me, and I can see the love in his eyes. Like a baby for a doll, a dog for a bone. “I’ll let Jason know we’re still on.”

He disappears into the other room and I set about peeling a bag of potatoes. The stove glistens, my handy work from this morning. I boil water and drop the potatoes into the pot. A small flame rears up around the electric burner, fueled by some chunk of charred flesh nestled deep inside. The forgotten food burns hot. Smoke emanates, a stench like burnt hair. I open the vent. My mother was the one who did all the cooking in my household. Everyone had a role. My mother, the cook, the artist. My brother, the spaz. My father the brilliant physicist, the absolute bastard. Outside the window a neighbor turns on his sprinklers to water his new lawn, which ends up soaking our driveway.

Gregg comes up behind me and puts his arms around my waist. He nuzzles my neck. “You have a way with potatoes.”

“French fingerlings don’t give me any lip.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Now the mashers, they’re just trouble.”

He chuckles. “You’re an odd bird, Darla.”

“You have no idea.”

Something about the lightness of the moment, the way his hand caresses my back, makes my heart swell. I want to share something with him. Something honest, real. “I won my fourth grade science fair.” It’s a small enough detail, harmless.

“You did?” he says.

“I completed an electrical circuit with a potato. We could do whatever we wanted. We just had to use food.” I don’t mention that I also created a thermo-siphoning batch heater with a

hollowed-out watermelon and a pseudo-anti-gravity device with three grapes and a carton of cottage cheese.

He is silent. After a few seconds he says, “Well, that’s adorable.”

What wasn’t adorable was that my dad showed up at the award ceremony with the teenage girl he was fucking.

The doorbell rings. I answer the door, and it’s Jason, looking cocky, smelling wonderful. He’s a virtual stranger, my husband’s friend—nothing more. A lapse. A mistake. I look him in the eye, hoping to stare him down, shame him into looking away. Instead he grins, looks at me like he’s stripping me down to the skin. Beyond skin, down to the bones, blood. Beyond that. Molecules, atoms.

“Hello,” I say.

“Hello Darla,” he says. He smirks. The odor of burnt hair lingers in the room. Something in the air feels like the end. Of life, of matter. The doorway is a cliff, with me on top, looking down.

“So, Darla,” Jason says. “I haven’t talked to you in a while. What’s new?” His eyes say, *you, straddled beneath me. That was new.*

“Nothing worth mentioning,” I say. “Nothing of any measure.”

“Really?” Jason says, cocking an eyebrow. Too playfully.

Gregg emerges from somewhere behind me, and Jason doesn’t miss a beat. “So, Darla. You happy to be married to a new millionaire?”

“Yes,” I say quickly. “I heard you two had a successful day.”

“Yeah,” Gregg says. “We certainly did. Now the real work begins. Come on in.”

Gregg pours some wine and we move to the living room. Gregg immediately begins reliving the glory of the day with Jason. As he speaks, I put my hand on his shoulder. An elaborate display of loyalty that cannot be misinterpreted. Back off. One mistake, that's it. It's over.

Both Jason and Gregg drain their glasses and Gregg gets up to refresh them. "I'm onto the hard stuff. Gin. Want some Hendricks?"

"Wouldn't miss it," Jason says.

As Gregg stands, the room goes dark. Pitch black. "What the hell?" Gregg says.

I can't see my hands in front of my face. I blink. The world has ended, after all. I step forward and stumble.

"Power station must have blown. Could be an accident," Gregg says.

"I think it's the big one," I say. "Blackout. Panic in the streets. Looting."

"Darla," Gregg says. "Don't be dramatic." The men head to the garage to mess with the circuit breaker. The silence ticks away in seconds. One two three four. Seventy eighty ninety. Three-thousand forty-nine, three-thousand fifty. Outside the window everything is pitch black. The lights are out in the entire neighborhood, maybe the world.

I feel my way to the kitchen drawer and pull out a flashlight. I open the oven. The potato casserole is mealy, ice-cold.

Gregg and Jason emerge from the garage. They stand in the doorway to the kitchen, shadowy figures in the dark. "We can go out to eat," Gregg says.

"What if the power's out all over town?" I say.

"Only one way to find out," he says.

He stands next to me. A man, his wife, her lover. A man, his friend, his friend's lay. I turn off the flashlight, and the blackness is total, complete. In the darkness they can't see my eyes. I hold up my hands, but they're invisible, the hands of a superhero: the invisible woman. A panic starts low, deep, rising through my body with each shallow breath.

"Wait," I choke.

"What?" Gregg says.

"I can't see. I can't see myself."

"Of course you can't. The power's out," Jason says softly. He's not condescending, just confused.

I shove past both of them, don't stop until I hit the dark street. I'm floating. A dwarf planet adrift in space, anchored to nothing. I stare down at my phantom stomach, legs, shoes, until some feeling comes back in my fingers. My eyes focus, until no one is looking out, except me.

"Darla?" Gregg says. He and Jason stand a few feet from me, frozen, afraid to break my spell. "I didn't know you were afraid of the dark?"

When I was fourteen, I took Timothy Burtrum into the woods, to one of the more remote make-out spots, about a half mile down a thin path, determined to lose my virginity. He was beautiful, with watery blue eyes and raven-black curls that bobbed as he walked. He was also fifteen, debate-team captain, and notorious with all the girls except me. My brains intimidated him, like they did all guys. Timothy was the only one who flat out ignored me.

Timothy was puffed-up, grand—charming in the way he touched the small of my back. We went deeper, the trees forming a canopy that gradually closed us in. We found the clearing

and he built a fire in the center of a bed of stones, discreetly looking back over his shoulder each time the wind howled.

His skittishness made me smile. Then he stood up bolt-straight and smoothed his slacks.

“What are you laughing at?” he said, eyes crinkling, lip curling.

“You,” I said, keeping my tone calm, even.

He picked up a pebble and tossed it at my leg, taking my directness to be playfulness.

“Yeah, well, I could laugh at you, too.”

“You could. It would help if I did something funny.”

“Well, why don’t you do one of your geek-tastic math tricks. Quick, what’s thirty-seven times nine-hundred twenty-three?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because.”

“Because why?”

“Because, who cares?”

He meets my stare. “You do.”

“What makes you think that?” I said, pointing to my head. “You think I asked for this bag of lumps?”

“You’re smart enough to play dumb,” he said. “But you don’t.”

Trumping him was easy. I took off my top.

He froze, watery blue eyes roaming south. I took off my bra.

“That’s the smartest thing I’ve seen you do,” he said.

I took off my jeans and panties. Then he didn't say a word and the silence was perfect. The bonfire clawed toward the sky, embers flying into the air, sparking, vanishing. I strutted around and pretend he wasn't even there, picking up a stick, stoking the fire with it. On the walk home, I picked dirty leaves out of my hair and every now and then a Volvo or a Fiat drove down the main road, headlights cutting through the thick lethargy of Saxton on a Tuesday night.

"I need to leave town for a few days," I say.

"For what?" Gregg's concern has crossed the line into complete alarm.

"I can't do this anymore," I say.

A pain tears through my chest. I hunch forward, forgetting my declaration. Here it is, my death—not some mystifying and glorious end in the family tradition, just a babbling, incoherent woman collapsing in the street. "I'm fine," I say, pushing them back. "I just need to sit."

They hover as I sit on the porch until the lights come on in the neighborhood. *I'm alive*, I think, though I'm not sure if I'm right. It turns out I'm not. Six months from now Gregg will return home from work to find me, his frantic words floating through my head without attaching to meaning, growing softer until they are a distant hum.

PANIC

The new sun cuts through your water glass, casting faces on the wall. Evil little men—pin eyes, no noses, big grins. The heart monitor volume is off, because you told the nurses you can't sleep with it on. You can't sleep, period.

Your husband has no problem with sleep. He is draped on the chair, breathing in and out, in and out, spittle dripping from his perfect mouth. He's unaware of the evil little man poised to chew up his Ralph Lauren tie. You focus on your own breathing. In out, in out, in out. Too fast. In In In. Shit, too deep. Your hands tingle. You focus on the dirty air duct on the ceiling until it no longer pulsates. You are in control.

An antiseptic smell chokes the air, as does the odor of your own sweat. Sounds of sickness waft under your door. In the hallway, a man coughs—it's phlegmy, deep, diseased. A woman tells a crying child, over and over, *everything is going to be okay*. You don't believe her, and neither does the child, who wails harder.

From the nurse's station or the next room or the next planet you hear a soft, regular beeping. Every now and then it stops (*death?*), then starts in again (*life!*). At that moment you believe that hospitals are the only buildings on earth that are never silent. Even outside the moans and prayers and medi-babble there are the bleeps and hums and whirs of these God-machines, stuck against and through flesh in futile attempts at immortality.

Your own machines are driving you fucking nuts. EKG pads press your chest, shoulders, legs with alarming pressure. An IV burrows into the crook of your arm like a cutworm. You force yourself to look at it, at the point where tube becomes vein. The clear cylinder runs deep red, but the union is hidden, slapped over with tape. The nurse couldn't find the right spot at first,

and your blood oozed on the gauze. Your veins are difficult, like you. She stuck you again. Bingo. You tasted saline and told her so. *That's impossible*, she said. *Well then it's a freak-ass miracle*, you said. Your heart sped to a pace that caused the doctor to run into your room and give you a shot. You writhed and begged him not to, but he did anyway. You used to fear doctors, now you hate them.

The petite, dark-haired woman in the bed next to you is sleeping gently. She's your age and about to lose the ability to have kids. Her ovaries are big hairy lumps of disease. You don't want to know this, but hospitals are the enemies of privacy. After you were admitted, you lay there, your husband at your side, both trying to tune out the conversation in the next bed. More than once, nervous, saucer-sized eyes flitted your way as the doctor talked. An apology, that you have to suffer her shame, as she does yours. Your husband pretended he couldn't hear. "Do you want to watch something on TV?" he said.

"No," you said.

"Read a book?" he said.

"No."

"I can act out a scene."

You smiled, begrudgingly. "Maybe later. Only if you do it with *feeling*."

The woman's husband is a big man with frown lines like fissures on his forehead. As the doctor talked, he looked not at his wife, but at his lap. He's got hands with calluses and a Band-Aid on his left knuckle. Working man's hands. Hands unlike your husband's. She talked in hushed whispers to him. "We can adopt," she said, her voice calm, steady. He said, *of course we can, of course we can*, but his eyes were flat. Now, he's somewhere else.

Under no circumstances do you want to have children. Even though your ovaries are fine—magnificent, even, tip top. Like good little soldiers, they march out eggs each and every month, your uterus renewing every twenty-eight days, like clockwork. The neighborhood wives tell you you'll change your mind, but you know you won't. They say you're selfish. Your husband wants kids, so you feel guilty, all the time. The conversations make him uncomfortable, so he changes the subject.

As you lie here, electrical signals from your body travel up and into the machines that you refuse to listen to. You have a love-hate relationship with electricity. Galvanized particles gather around your family members and kill them. Lightning has claimed the life of your father. Raw electricity has claimed the life of your great grandfather. Your three aunts on your father's side have fainting spells around transformers and see spots when they use the microwave. Yet, sometimes you stand outside in your yard right before it storms, when the sky is azure and alive, the breeze gently brushing your body like a lover's breath. The ozone in the air is thick, and you can feel it in your pores. Particles are about to rush together with all the power of the heavens, but now they're waiting, in juiced clouds that are beautiful, terrible. These same electrons travel at terrifying speeds through your brain, allowing you to calculate equations before your husband can blink, to notice subtle changes in your friend's face, indicating she's about to lie to her husband, before she fully realizes it herself. Sometimes you feel like you're psychic. You want to be normal, but you aren't.

An orderly enters your room, a muscled man wearing a buttoned-to-the-neck white shirt and crisp white pants. The Good Humor man on steroids.

“Still awake?” he says. “You need your rest.”

He stares into your eyes too intently, and you're wired so they're probably bugging out of your head. "Well, I got some rest the other day."

"The other day?"

You can't remember when you slept. "Thursday." Today is Sunday.

"That's not healthy," he says in a voice that's too loud, threatening to wake the others.

You want to tell him to whisper. "Can you please *whisper*," you say.

He frowns, but at least he stops talking long enough to fiddle with your heart monitor. He frowns deeper, and your heart lurches, which makes him frown even more. He checks your blood pressure and writes down some numbers. Normal blood pressure is 120 over 70 and you're 150 over 90, like you've been for the past six days. You wait for him to tell you that your heart is about to explode and that he's sorry that you're critical, even though secretly he's just glad that he won't have to look at your bug eyes anymore.

Instead he takes out a needle. He says, softly this time, "I'm going to draw one last vial of blood."

"Sure, I have some to spare."

He ties your arm with the rubber band. You've seen the Discovery Channel. You're just a junkie, getting some black tar, junk, mud, skag.

"You okay?"

"Sure, just give me my smack."

With a pinch the Good Humor Man gives you your fix. It's bad dope—nausea hits you at once, draining strength from your arms. You don't react, lest they try to hold you down again

and give you another shot. Then it's over, and your dealer doesn't even look at you when he leaves.

“Usually when guys extract fluids from me they stick around to cuddle.” You are yelling, even though you just demanded quiet. Unbelievably, your husband is still sleeping. The petite dark-haired woman is still sleeping, too. Maybe you aren't yelling, after all.

The dope is really bad, because a fist squeezes the organs in your chest. Lungs. Stomach. Heart. Fingers splay into your ribs, stabbing your ribcage. Your neurons are firing too quickly, your synapses lighting up like the Vegas strip. You feel everything. The blood coursing through your veins. Every cell, every atom. This is panic. This is a panic attack, that's all it is. Another pain rips through your chest and down your left arm. No, this is a heart attack. Women are more likely to die of heart attacks than men. Something is wrong with your wiring.

Tiny sparkles in the air spin, flip, fly—it's Cirque de Soleil in your eyes. You need to get out of here, now. If you're going to die, you're not going to do it in front of Good Humor man or the hard-luck dark-haired woman or your husband. It's so loud in this room, and he is still sleeping, so you think maybe he is in a coma. Maybe the noise is all inside your head, like a bad TV signal.

You fumble with your wires. The nurse at the station notices.

“What are you doing?” she says. “Bathroom,” you mutter. “Oh,” she says, and smiles.

She untangles you from your IV cart and leads you there on your rubber legs. You're inside, alone, but she's never going to let you leave. You're going to die on a hospital toilet. You look around. Hand sanitizer and Band-Aids are on the sink. Flowers and motorcycles line the wallpaper. What do flowers have to do with motorcycles? Is this someone's sick idea of a

gender-neutral shitter? You wonder how many people have died in a bathroom, like Elvis. You don't want to be fat Elvis on a toilet, you want to be skinny Elvis on stage. Maybe you can get a sequin-lined coffin.

The fist deflates your lungs. You breathe, without getting enough air. With any luck your heart is black by now, like your father's. What went through his mind in his last seconds? Did he think of your brother, you? Did he worry about shitting himself in front of everyone?

You try to rein in your thoughts. The walls ebb and flow so you need to make a break for it before you pass out. You open the door a crack and you are in luck. The nurse is in the hallway, smiling and nodding at the bastard doctor who gave you the shot. Freedom! Your husband is snoring softly.

You rip out your IV and blood flows down your arm. A stream of you hits the bathroom floor, pooling silently, without grace. You walk softly toward your robe draped across a corner chair and tie the belt around your arm. You put on the robe. The doctor and nurse are looking at a chart, so you head in the opposite direction, down the hall. You are going to the gift shop, to buy yourself some flowers. Since you're dying and all, they need to be extra special. Maybe a rose bouquet. No, that's not special enough. Rose bouquets are for foot surgery, possibly a new baby. Death requires one of those giant funeral casket sprays, with gerberas and gladioli and a giant, shock-white god-damned-bigger-than-life bow. The gift shop will be closed, but you don't care.

A month ago, you are in the supermarket with the closest thing to a friend you have, one of the wives—a carefree no-nonsense woman in her thirties with bottle-shocked red hair and giant boobs. She's cheating on her husband, same as you. She likes to say that he deserves it,

because he's always at work. Her husband doesn't have a clue about her infidelity so you feel sorry for him. For the same reason, you give him little respect.

Your friend is planning to cook dinner for you, and she's asking you what you want to go with your pork loin. A pain shoots up your left arm, and you double over.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine. Something hurt?"

"No."

"You lie. You're a terrible liar! I thought I was the liar in this friendship!"

She has no idea how much you lie about. You lie about your family, your smarts, your birthplace, everything. You're just having one particular problem lying about this one particular heart attack.

"Cauliflower, I want cauliflower," you say.

She stays with you in your car until the pain subsides.

A half-hour later you have sex with your lover. You don't intend to go over there, but you drive and drive until you reach his house. You stand in his doorway, cross your arms, uncross them, cross them again. He doesn't know what to say, so he wraps his arms around you, crossed arms and all. Before he has a chance to protest, you stand on your tiptoes and place your lips on his, in a brief, chaste peck. He stands still, doesn't move. You move your arms so they are encircling him now and you open your mouth, deepening the kiss. He stands frozen until his body gives in to you once again and he lets himself take pleasure in your tongue, and you feel

alive. When it's all over, his expression is alien, lost. You get dressed and shut the door, the distance between you growing bigger by the second.

When you get home you tell your husband that the lamb was delicious, and he takes you out for ice cream. You order triple-chocolate-molten-fudge on a cake cone. You are amazed at how easy this is for you.

The air is thick and humid, weighing you down like folds of extra skin. "Question," he says, in the form of a statement.

When your husband says *Question* like that, it means he's about to ask you something strange. Initially, this bit of randomness was charming, one of the things you liked about him. The way he perceives himself as fanciful, playful, but doesn't realize that ultimately the questions take on a practical bent. Now, more and more, you find these games disturbing. He says, "What would you do if there were, say, no more ice cream?"

"I'd stop coming to ice cream parlors."

"What if there were no more ice cream parlors," he says, looking up at the *Mr. Frosty* sign. It's the apocalypse. Would you loot?"

"Grocery stores, I guess."

"Would you rob the neighbors?"

"No."

"Why not?" he says. "The neighbors would rob you. This is survival."

"*This*," you say, holding up your cone, "is dessert."

"You need to toughen up," he says, but his tone is light, breezy.

“You act like it would be simple,” you say. “The stories you hear about plane crashes, and the survivors eat each other like so much flank steak. Could you?”

“Could I what?”

“Eat me.”

“Are you dead?”

“Yes.”

“Then yes.”

“Just like that!”

He pauses. Then he says, “Well, you’re dead,” with the no-nonsense practicality he brings to the boardroom.

“Yes, but *I’m your wife.*”

“But *you’re dead.*”

You throw what’s left of your cone in the garbage. “Would you hesitate, check to make sure first?”

He rakes his hair with his hand. “This is hypothetical. Stop getting so upset.”

“Well you don’t have to be hypothetically nonchalant about it.”

“How should I be?”

“Hypothetically devastated.”

“I am. I am very hypothetically devastated,” he says with feeling, touching your hand.

“Good.” Gregg’s ice cream drips down his chin. “No marinating or anything,” you say. No garnishes. Eat me if you have to, but don’t enjoy it.”

Since then, a giant mouth waits for you each and every night, behind your eyelids. It swallows you whole, like Jonah's whale. Digestive juices dissolve your skin, muscle, bone. Blood pools in what's left of your throat and you scream until you wake.

You sit bolt upright. Your head is throbbing, and your feet are cold. Where are you? A mop head is to your left. Closet. You passed out, for how long you're not sure, but they haven't found you yet. There are flaws in your plan, big ones. You have no shoes, no money, no car keys, no cell phone. Everything is back in your room, so you'll just be a barefoot crazy lady hoofing around town in her jammies. You need a cigarette. The mop nearly topples to the floor as you stand. The lights in the hallway are like little suns.

Your husband rounds the corner and nearly knocks you down. He blinks, then smiles—haggard, half-crazed. “There you are,” he says, and folds you into his arms. He hugs you for too long, then releases. “Where did you go?”

“Went for a walk.”

“In a hospital? At six AM? You ripped out your IV.” He looks like he wants to kill you or kiss you. He chooses the latter.

You pull away. “I need to get out of here.”

“But your heart. They need to do the stress test at 7.”

“My heart is fine. It's all panic. My mother had panic attacks, this must be it. Same thing happened to me when I was seventeen.”

“You don't know anything for sure. You were crumpled up in pain. You lost consciousness. Just get the test.”

“I’m leaving. Just get me out of here.” You start walking and your husband protests, but he follows you and helps you dress and gather your things, and you sign yourself out against medical advice.

Through the car windshield, the sun comes up over the horizon. “Let’s go home,” he says.

“Not home.”

“Where to, then?” he says, tentative, wary.

“Take me to the water.”

There’s a secluded strip of coast, far enough outside Miami Beach that most of the tourists end up being gulls and egrets, with a cluster of coconut palms and strips of golden grasses. You dig your toes in the sand and submerge your arm in the water, relieving it of its crusted blood. The hospital band is still on your wrist. You smoke, right there on the beach, flicking ashes in the water.

Sometimes there’s a smattering of beachgoers, but this morning there’s no one else, just you and your husband. He hovers at first, but you keep wandering off, so he gives you space, eyes you sideways, pretends he’s not looking.

You take out your phone. You don’t know who to call, but you want to call someone. You call your friend and hang up before she answers. You call your lover. “Hello,” he says, his voice husky, foreign.

“It’s done,” you say.

“I’m sleeping.” he says. After a beat, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Well, I was in the hospital, but the Good Humor Man gave me smack and now I’m fine.”

“What?”

“Have a nice life,” you say and hang up. You’ve had different flavors of this conversation with him a hundred times before.

You call your hospital room.

A man answers. The husband.

“Is she okay?”

“Who is this?”

“I was in this room earlier. A patient. I was in the bed next to her. Is she okay?”

He pauses. Then he says, exhaling, “She’s in surgery now.”

Right now, doctors are slicing her open, exposing her more intimately than a lover. Later she’ll be missing part of herself, but unlike you, she’ll still be whole.

“Are you?”

“Me?”

“Yeah, are you okay?”

The million-dollar question. From a distance, you catch your husband looking at you, his hands shoved in the pockets of his Dockers, which are rolled up to his knees. There’s a slouch to his whole body that you’ve never noticed before, even though your super-conductive brain makes you notice things. You hang up the phone without answering.

ST. AUGUSTINE

He grabbed her hand and held tight, strolling her down St. George Street past sparkling shops, ushering her past alleys entombed in darkness. Her fingers were cold and slick against an unseasonable chill. “This is supposed to be the most romantic city in America,” he said. “And the most haunted,” he said as an afterthought. His tongue was thick with bourbon. He felt lighter than he had in a long time.

“Ghosts are strange,” she said. “Vague, formless—yet somehow powerful.” Her black hair blew in the wind, obscuring her face with spidery threads. She shivered, and he felt it down her arm and up his. Three blocks later she untwined their fingers and her specter floated up ahead of him, her skirt billowing out. He said nothing. Her grace always rendered him speechless.

Two more blocks of this and he tried to draw her back. “Want to do a tour?” he said.

She turned. Her eyes blazed with humor and several shots of rum. This was how he liked to remember her. The fiery girl from when they first met.

“I never thought you one for the touristy stuff,” she said.

“Well, we’re tourists,” he said. “Why not?”

“You, my darling, are anything but a tourist,” she said. “Besides, I think the ghosts will find us.” She puffed her cigarette, lips red as cherries. “Guide or no guide.”

When he met her, she hadn’t smoked.

“A carriage ride, then.”

The *clack clack clack* of hooves was constant, echoing around and through America’s oldest city. St. Augustine erupted around them, couples laughing and strolling arm in arm, azure lights from the windows of quaint little restaurants shining like love across their faces. He

flagged down an antique carriage drawn by a brown stallion whose eyes were obscured by black plates.

He held out his hand once more, pulling her to him in an embrace, tasting rum and nicotine on her lips. Her kiss was stiff only for a moment, then she softened.

She pulled away, her eyes flitting sideways at the driver. She stomped out her cigarette. “We’d better cool it, before the driver owes *us* money.” She looked into the distance at nothing in particular. “Shall we?”

He helped her climb into the carriage and sat next to her, resting his hand on her knee. Her blue silk dress had a plunging neckline. She’d been dressing more provocatively lately. The locket he’d given her that morning to mark their six-year anniversary hung at her breasts. She looked down at her lap, then back up at him.

“I’m trying, she said.” Before they left home, she had promised to try.

The carriage brought them down Bridge Street, up Cordova and back to St. George. The narrow streets and balconied, Spanish-style buildings scrolled slowly past as they traveled in silence, carried along by the cold November wind. They were staying at a small bed and breakfast right in the heart of the historic district, tucked away down a side street. The driver dropped them in front of their side door, where the aged proprietor bade them good evening, smiling, no doubt remembering why young folks retired to their room so early.

Someone had put mints on their starched white pillows. “Classy,” she said.

The lamps cast a burnt yellow glow over the antique-laden room. He hugged her, wondering. He didn’t need to wonder for long. Soon they clawed at each other with reservation,

then with clumsy abandon. His body craved warmth. He massaged and caressed until she cried out, but she stayed cool to the touch.

He woke and she was nowhere to be found. He bolted out of bed, checked the bathroom. Her shoes were gone. When he found her at the corner deli, she was getting coffee. She looked up at him, her eyes becoming wide.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Her blue eyes were bright with alarm. “You said you wouldn’t do this,” she said.

“You need to be careful,” he said.

“I’m always careful.”

They ate breakfast, eggs on toast with hash browns. After they finished, they browsed at the local art museum. She was transfixed by a watercolor that looked like an oncoming train or a stack of plates, depending on how you viewed it. She stared at that one for a good ten minutes, before she moved on, to charcoal drawings and metal sculptures. Whenever she looked at him, he would quickly glance at a Manet or a Van Gogh.

They ate lunch at a seafood restaurant, overlooking water lapping hungrily at the shore. She ordered smoked salmon and white wine. The pink on her nails was flaking off.

“I talked to your mother today,” she said.

“When?” he said.

“This morning, when you were still up in the room. I answered your phone.”

“What did she say?”

“She asked to talk to you.”

He snapped his breadstick in half and dipped it in olive oil. The waiter stopped by and he demanded the check.

Outside, the cobblestone streets came together in a V that seemed to expand forever. He put his arm around her, and she let him. She touched his wrist lightly.

Before they'd travelled from Coral Gables to Saint Augustine, they got into an argument about a fence.

She had planted marigolds near the white stakes that wrapped their home. He stood at the kitchen window and thought his heart might burst at the sight of her out there, covered in dirt, flitting back and forth like a sparrow, carrying plants from the wheelbarrow to the ground. He needed to hold her, at that very moment. He called to her. She didn't answer.

He went over to her and she kept digging the earth with her hands until her fingers were raw.

"I'm planting," she said.

"Why won't you talk to me?" he said.

She still wasn't talking, as she sat silently at the table, looking toward the water. The day began to wane, the sun low in the sky.

"One more touristy destination for today," he said.

According to the literature, the Castile de San Marcos, cold and fierce, its stone walls massive, had been extremely effective at keeping out the British onslaughts of the 18th century. He paid the six dollars to gain them entrance. They milled about, listened to part of a spiel from a tour guide. They then ascended the uneven stairs, climbed until they reached the top. Anastasia

Island loomed in the distance, across fingers of ocean. Along the walls of the fortress hulked a series of ancient bronze cannons.

She went over to the edge, peered over at the dirt courtyard below. A cluster of mosquitoes swirled around a standing pool of muck in the corner. They swarmed around his shoulders. He brushed them away.

He was taken by how small and frail she looked, her white linen skirt against the rough stones of the massive fort, shrinking into an oversized sweater that seemed to swallow her whole. He went up behind her and scooped her up in his arms, hugging tight. The wind picked up, and his step faltered.

“How long do you think it took the Spaniards to build this impenetrable fortress?” he said into her neck.

“Something like several decades.”

Her skin smelled of baby powder and a musky, heavy scent that was unmistakably hers.

She broke free from his embrace. She climbed up on the ledge and faced the sea, standing completely still, as if the slightest motion would send her toppling to the ground, or cause her to float away.

“The Spaniards were strong,” she said. “They were able to repel the British for two months, tucked away safe inside these walls.”

Alarm shot up his spine. “You need to get down.”

She hovered there, looking straight ahead. The sun blazed through the knitted holes in her sweater, lighting her up like a Christmas-tree star.

The look on her face, one of intense longing, made the hairs on his neck stand up. She floated higher and higher, until she was hovering over the clouds, beyond the birds, above the atmosphere, streaming through air thinned and extinguished into nothing. He fought the urge to grab her, lest he send her hurtling over the edge.

“You’re my wife,” he said, to reassure himself. He wasn’t sure of anything else about her, anymore. He opened his mouth to say something else but stopped. His hands trembled. “It’s all going to be okay,” he said.

A mother cradling her young son frowned at him. He wanted to tell the woman about the soldiers, who waged war until their cannons were spent, their strength drained, their bodies lifeless. Another tourist snapped a picture, setting off a blinding flash somewhere to his left. His wife up on the ledge looked scared, gingerly climbed down. He hugged her, more lightly than before. She allowed his embrace, but continued to float up and up, until she was circling the heavens.

KATE AND RICHARD

Their son still had no name. For six weeks he had been Sweetie, or Dumpling, or Darling, or Sugar Face, or Handsome, or Baby Boy like on the birth certificate, and sometimes just You (*Hi, You! What'cha doin' there, You!?*) and they were no closer to figuring it out. Baby Boy looked up at the sky, his tiny face pinched, like the butt-end of a star fruit. *This is a crisis*, the woman thought.

“What about William?” the man said. “After William Rowan Hamilton.”

“Who?”

“Astronomer, physicist.”

“William.” The woman released the flat note into the air, hoping it would swell to the heavens and return to her ears a beautiful melody. Instead, it got lost on the breeze. Baby Boy shifted between them on the blanket, turning toward her. He stared stock-still, expectant, curling her insides into a tiny ball.

“What about Stephen?”

“Stephen?”

“You know, Hawking.”

She thought about this one, and when she didn't respond, he said, “How hard is this?” as he popped the top off a dandelion. “It shouldn't be this hard. Let's just *pick one*.”

“He's going to live with this name the rest of his life,” she said. “We need to be sure.”

The girl teetered and tottered along the edge of the yard, running confidently, despite her age. The girl had been easy. Before the crisis, the man left such matters to the woman, and as soon as the girl was born, the woman knew. Purposely, she didn't decide beforehand, no matter

how many baby books her frustrated mother produced. She refused to even think about the name, until they placed the quiet girl in her arms. Immediately, she knew. With the boy—when they placed him in her arms, a frantic, crying creature—came a blank. With that blank, came others. *How long do I feed him? How much should he sleep?* She forgot everything. She second-guessed herself. *What if I put him down wrong, and he suffocates?* What if I drop him? The name was no different. *What if kids tease him?*

She panicked, needed to offer something, to be done with this. Finally, she said, “Maybe we can call him Kevin. After my Uncle.”

“Kevin.” She heard the period after the name.

Overhead, stars were just beginning to emerge from a knot of orange-purple haze. She remembered when she was a girl, looking up at the sky, offering up wishes, back when she believed such things were possible. One of the things she used to love about her husband was that he was always looking up, from the safety of the ground spending his days traipsing through the heavens.

“What about Polaris,” she said, teasing. “He’ll be the only one in his class.”

He smiled, eyes still skyward. “What about Camelopardalis?”

She laughed, too, and it felt familiar, foreign. “Might not fit on a lunch box.” Their boy had drifted asleep, his breathing a regular cycle of fits and starts. “There’s a million stars out there. At least one of them has to be right.”

“Actually,” he said, distracted, his gaze still lost somewhere overhead, “there’s more like 70 sextillion.”

“Even better,” she tried.

“Most of them just go by coordinates.” He turned and looked at her, his alarming blue eyes visible even in twilight. After a pause his smile returned, and he said, “You never told me what you thought of calling him Richard. Why not Richard Junior?”

She studied Baby Boy, his brown eyes and wide cheeks and long nose, and tried to figure out how to refuse this one name.

FALLING

On January 15, 1952, the day Kate's grandmother took a turn for the worse, Kate's mother Penny was busy becoming the most accomplished saucer-sled racer on Garrison Avenue. She was just finishing her twentieth run, the layer of white powder dented and dirty on the path she had carved with her orange steel dish. The gentle slope turned into flat yard, and she came to a stop.

"This hill is *dumb*."

The voice belonged to her neighbor, Jared Henry, a boy of about eleven with big eyes and a small face and a knack for saying the wrong thing. Penny regarded him from her sled, her lungs stinging from hours washed in cold, wet air, elation seeping out with her breath as she exhaled.

"You've been out here using it—how dumb does that make you?"

Jared wrinkled his tiny, wind-burned nose. "Felt sorry for you, is all. Out here by yourself all day. Come on, Mikey, let's go use a *real* hill. One with a *slope*."

Michael Henry was Jared's affable, slightly younger brother, who shared a fourth grade class with Penny. Up until this point he had been quietly kicking some snow with his boots.

"Come on, man, the hill's not that bad."

The look on his face was not one of someone who believed in her hill. She had seen this look before, on her father's face, right before he bought another box of the Scout cookies he hated from a sad-eyed girl at their door.

Penny wanted no part of it. She jumped to her feet, handing out a curt "I don't want either of you to be here," before starting toward her house. She walked slowly and didn't turn around until the echoing crunch of boots and the hiss of sleds behind her had ceased.

#

The small kitchen was warm, almost cozy. She half expected the familiar smell of chicken soup and her mother's half-joking attempts at hiding the *Campbell's* can to greet her as she entered.

"You're half Italian, aren't you supposed to know how to make things from scratch?" her father would tease as he ushered Penny into the house, shaking the snow from his coat.

Her mother would shoot him a mock-angry look. "You're looking at the half that doesn't want to spend four hours in the kitchen."

Now there was no aroma, no banter: only a stale, musty odor and eerie quiet.

Her dad was at the dining room table again, and for a second she thought he had been holding his head in his hands. Before she could be sure, he looked up and made a quick motion to smooth his wispy hair. He grinned. It ended up being more of a grimace, making him look menacing. "I was wondering when you were going to come in. Don't you have homework to do? A report due on Monday?" His voice was hoarse. When she didn't respond, he sighed. "Did you have fun?"

Two amber bottles stood on the table in front of him. She chose instead to focus on a small spot where shiny wood was visible under some papers. "You know, Jared and Michael are going to the Track."

His mouth set, and he repeated each word slowly and with deliberation. "To. The. Track."

The Track was glorious. It was a sledding run on her street that ten or so of the neighbors had built, on the side of a large hill, at the edge of a mountainous forest—the whole area being

part of the Appalachians. She had seen it once—it was at least two-hundred feet long with a steep drop and two whole turns, carefully built up on the sides like one of those bobsled trails in the Olympics. Of course her father refused to let her use it. She only half-listened anymore when he would start in—like he was now—with *it's too dangerous* and *I want you to stay close to the house*. He never seemed to remember the days before he'd given himself over to the dining room table and thoughts of the small, dim room at the end of the hall, numb to everywhere and everything else.

Back then things were different. They had lived in their old house, one with a steep backyard that had too many trees. He would pile with her onto her red metal toboggan and they would careen down the hill, laughing as he steered to avoid this pine or that pine or that maple.

She concentrated hard, and she was back there, even as her father was producing pills from one of the bottles and saying something that sounded like “*Why don't you take these to your mother?*” She remained there as she entered that small, dim room at the end of the hall, the one with the blinds closed just enough to let a hint of waning sunlight seep through. The ghostly visage that barely registered on the white pillow was actually rosy and pink and beautiful, the cold turning cheeks into candy hearts. The face belonged to her mother, who was back there with Penny, laughing, alternately throwing bare handfuls of snow at her and blowing on numbed fingers as the toboggan raced by.

Just then the apparition opened her eyes, awake now, and Penny was awake now, too. The hand that clutched the blanket was flaky and grey, and her mother held it out to her. “Come here, Bella.” Once lilting and fiery, her mother's strong, musical voice had become somber and thin. Hard for Penny to listen to. “Bella. Darling. *Vieni a sederti vicino a me.*”

Bella—beautiful—was her mother’s name for her; she hardly ever actually called her Penny. The rest of what her mother had said was in Italian, a language Penny didn’t understand. Penny’s mother had been born here in Connecticut but lived in Florence with her Italian mother and Irish-American father until she was five and they returned to the States. English formed her words every day after that, but now as she sank deeper and deeper, she was reverting more and more to the language of her childhood.

Penny ignored the barely outstretched hand and hurried over to the nightstand, setting down the sleeping pills next to damp washcloths that were heaped together. This morning her mother had tried to get out of bed and made it as far as the door to the bedroom before collapsing on the floor in tears, screaming, clawing at the rug. The doctor came with more pills and there were some somber looks and hushed whisperings in the kitchen, and Penny could make out *it’s time* and *there’s no other way*. She heard him tell her father, “I’ll make some calls. It’s for the best.” This was before they understood such things, so up until her death two years later, Penny’s mother would be carted away for long stretches: departing wild-eyed in the front seat of the car and returning, limp-necked, in the back.

Penny felt the walls coming in on her and mumbled an excuse as she backed toward the door, away from her mother’s soft expression, away from the dark circles cradling her mother’s keen eyes. Everything about her was fading, but Penny couldn’t get over how her eyes were still bright.

Soon she was in the hallway and her father was there with first a surprised look and then one that was hard to distinguish but made her cringe just the same.

“Homework,” she muttered before taking off into the dark toward her room.

#

In the morning Penny was piling snow on top of her family's patio table. She had meticulously dragged it from its former home in basement storage to its new one at the top of the slope of her yard—first turning it over, then covering it with a tarp that she had found under the porch. She had to admit, Jared was right—the hill had been dumb. Just as soon as she would feel the wind numbing her face, spiking into her ears and tossing her hair into the air, the sensation would stop, having lasted only a few seconds. What she needed was a steeper drop. Then she could get more distance.

The launch pad was ready to go and she struggled to put first her sled, then herself, on top of it without slipping. Once she was settled, making sure the towrope and the ends of her scarf were tucked safely inside, she took a deep, cold breath, anticipating the exhilaration of speed.

There had been a dusting overnight. Sunlight glistened off the snow before her, sparkling like lead crystal. Their home was a good ways ahead, the two-bedroom ranch house washed in shadows, looking even smaller and stiller from her perch on top of the hill. Her dad was still sleeping. He slept alone, so as to not disturb her mother, and he hadn't yet emerged from his bedroom. If he had, he never would have allowed this little experiment of hers to continue.

Penny closed her eyes for a moment, marveling at the fact that there were no sounds—not even birds. Then the perfect silence was ruined by the crunching of boots behind her.

The Henrys were back. “What *exactly* do *you* think you're *doing*?” Jared said, his singsong voice grating on her nerves.

“Preparing for takeoff.” And with that she inched her sled closer to the end of the table, the plastic scraping the tarp that peeked through the snow, the legs wobbling with her efforts.

There was a snap and her sled hit something thin and hard. She slid a few feet and then twisted horizontally and her ski pants hit the cold.

“I knew it! Of course it broke. Christ, it’s a plastic table. What did you think would happen?”

She struggled to her feet and was about to say something but he beat her to it. “Why do you keep on out here all day, every day, anyway? Shouldn’t you be, I dunno, spending time *inside*. Keeping your mom away from the knives.”

An anger swift and fierce wracked through her body. Before she could strike him, the other Henry, Michael, appeared from somewhere off to the side. He shoved his brother. She hadn’t even known he was out here, although she should have expected as much, as the two didn’t spend any time apart at all. Jared stumbled backwards, looking stunned. “What did you do that for?”

Michael cast his eyes to the ground, then up as far as Jared’s jacket, his voice deeper and louder than she had ever heard it before. “Just leave her alone.”

Jared’s smile grew wide then faded a little. “What, do you *liiiiike* her or something?” Michael kicked a patch of dirt under the snow and told him to shut up.

Jared looked at Penny, then his brother, and something she couldn’t quite figure passed between them. Jared’s face was dark when he turned back to her again. “I’m leaving.”

Michael watched his brother go, looking alternately indecisive, then embarrassed, then as if he was about to say something. Finally: “So, how are *things*? I mean, you know, at home. I mean—with your family.” It was a question she dreaded, a question she always got in one form or another from classmates and teachers and parents.

Penny clenched her jaw and said what she always said, in a way that had force and finality and always ended the conversation. “Things are *fine*.”

Things were still fine as she turned away from Michael and as she picked up her sled and as she carried it with her into the house. Things were fine right up until she saw her father at the dining room table and then suddenly they weren’t.

“I want to go to the Track. The hill in our yard is a joke.” She threw her sled down in the middle of the floor.

Her father raised his eyebrows, then lowered them. “You know how I feel about that.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Dangerous. Why can’t you come with me? Like before. Remember before? You never want to come with me. We can both slide—then you can make sure I’m safe.”

Now her father was saying *No, no*, over and over. Shaking his head. Saying that he didn’t think he should leave the house and that besides, her mother was awake and she was asking about her.

“So let her ask. Why doesn’t she get out of the damn bed and come ask me herself?”

Now, her father’s stunned silence and his angry look and his ordering her to her room to think about what she had said. She had had enough thinking; now she wanted nothing more than to be racing down the glorious fifty-foot Track, wind tearing through her hair, feeling nothing but disoriented and dizzy and alive. By the time night came she had worn a path around her bedroom, waiting for her father’s door to close for the final time. She put on her snowsuit and then she was out the front door, flashlight and red dish in hand, making her way toward the forbidden hill.

#

The snow-packed street was quiet. Over and over her father's words played in her head as she walked: *Your mother is asking about you.* She couldn't count the number of times it had been the other way around. For years, since this all started. When her mother first refused to get out of bed for a morning here and there, then for a few days, then weeks. *Why can't Mom eat breakfast with us? Or why can't Mom help me with my homework?* The reasons had always been *Mom isn't feeling well,* or *Mom is too tired.* Always there had been an answer, but soon she learned there were no real answers, just more questions. Around the time their house, the house Penny grew up in, became too much to manage and they had to sell it—around the time they moved into the two-bedroom ranch house—she stopped asking.

Her breath puffed out ahead of her in steady bursts as she reached her destination. She started her climb to the top. She steadied herself against rocks and logs, grabbing onto pine trees to keep from slipping down the side. The temperatures had dropped and the slushy snow had turned to solid ice.

When she reached the summit her breath caught, but not from the cold or fatigue. The sled trail that her neighbors had made looked even more magnificent by moonlight than it had on the day after school when she had stolen up here. The initial drop went straight down, the path curving to the right in a large arc that went some four feet into the air, the extra snow meant to prevent sleds from spiraling into a large maple tree that loomed straight ahead. After the first curve the path wound down and around and then took one final turn to the left. The contours and shadows magnified the turns, making them seem monstrous.

She put her flashlight down, since the moon was huge and low and reflected like a mirror off the frozen landscape. She carefully placed her sled on the landing and climbed inside the metal shell.

On the day her family had moved out of her childhood home, her mom was having one of her good days and had ridden in Penny's red toboggan with her, against her father's better judgment.

You're not strong—you should be resting.

Nonsense, I'm fine. Right Bella?

Her mother's jet-black hair had whipped into Penny's face, smelling of sweetness and spice, honey and cinnamon. The memory held her as she inched closer to the edge.

Now, falling. Faster and faster, a glorious freedom like nothing she could describe. Wind knifed at her face. Cold lunged down into the top of her jacket, chilling her to the core, but that didn't matter. What mattered was the feeling. It lasted only a split second, but it was exquisite.

Then something went wrong. The front part of her sled caught as she hit the arc of the first turn. She flipped over and came to rest under her sled, her arm underneath her at a terrible angle.

Penny lay there for what seemed like forever. Then she scrambled upright. Pain shot up her arm, emanating from her right wrist. It's *broken*, she thought.

Somehow she managed to slide down the rest of the track. She crossed the icy field that led to the road, staggering and slipping in spots. Her wrist throbbed, but she didn't cry.

When she entered her house her father was in the kitchen, drinking milk that he had heated on the stove. His face turned white when he saw his daughter, who was supposed to be

sleeping, burst through the front door in her snowsuit. It went even whiter when he saw her wrist. By now it was purple and swollen to a size bigger than her hand.

“Penny, oh Penny.” He knew what she had done, and she guessed he’d deal with that later. “We have to get you to the hospital.”

Penny said nothing as she turned away from him, toward the small room at the end of the hall. Perhaps it was instinct. She couldn’t be sure. Her mother was sleeping, but Penny turned on the light and sat down on the bed anyway. Still dazed with sleep and medication, she stirred, uncertain eyes fluttering open. Penny could barely hear her words. “Bella? That you? *Tu sei la mia luce.*”

She put her ruined hand on her mother’s chest and tears fell. Only because of the pain, she reasoned, and only continuing into the next week and the next because her bone wasn’t knitting right. A voice, quiet and soothing, continued whispering unintelligibly into the air. Penny echoed the strange words inside her own thoughts until she understood everything and nothing.

THE STORY OF NOTHING, PART I

Out of nowhere, over breakfast casserole one morning, Gregg says, “We should get a dog. The house is too quiet.”

I take a bite of my mother’s savory egg dish that Gregg once professed to love, but lately barely touches. “How would you know it’s quiet? You’re never here.” Our marriage has disintegrated into these verbal torpedoes. “Plus, I’m allergic.”

“I’m here after work. And there’s pills for that now, right?”

That’s how Carl comes into our lives. He’s a ten-year-old Lab/Dalmatian mix, solid yellow with three black spots like bowling ball holes on his forehead. He was a short-timer, in league to be put down. The lady at the shelter said he overcame liver cancer with his previous owners. “You should call him Lucky.”

I don’t know how lucky he is to have ended up on death row, or to have somehow fallen out with owners who once cared enough to guide him through cancer. Or, to have ended up with us, for that matter. I name him Carl Stephens, and Gregg laughs but doesn’t object. The different last name from ours is noncommittal, neutral. He’s a roommate, a boarder.

Gregg is active in Carl’s life for about a month before Gregg resumes staying late at the office. Most days, it’s just Carl and me. “He’s a good watch dog, for when I’m not around,” Gregg has taken to saying.

Carl, however, has other plans. He doesn’t bark when a delivery driver comes to the door, and he doesn’t growl to alert us when someone is on the lawn. Most days he’ll sit and stare idly at the television, or out the window. His eyes are unfocused, as if he’s somewhere else, reliving

past hardships or glories. A lifetime of hard living is behind him, and he's decided he's earned the rest.

It's Saturday, and Gregg is playing with Carl on the lawn, making up for lost time. He throws a ball, then a stick, trying to get Carl to fetch. Carl lies at Gregg's feet, cocking his head toward each object in turn, as if wondering at its crimes. After a while Carl walks over to the ball and nudges it, then resumes his original position. Carl idolizes Gregg. They say that a dog will choose one of its owners: it may tolerate the other, but it will belong only to one. Carl doesn't pay me any mind, only to scratch at the door when he needs to go out. I will dutifully put the leash on him, and his unfocused eyes cast away as he's lifting his leg on our tree.

"I don't think he likes me much," I say.

"You're not trying hard enough," Gregg says. He's in a good mood today, his features softening into boyish good looks. "Let's take Carl to the dog park."

Three blocks from our house, in between the cemetery and the ice cream stand, is the park. It's right out of a landscaping brochure: bottlebrush flank a wrought-iron fence and a manicured field the color of cut emeralds.

"How come we can't get our own lawn this green?" I say.

"All the dog shit," Gregg says. "Fertilizer."

I hold Carl's leash. He walks between us, close to Gregg's leg. He's deliberate in his walks—slow, concentrating solely on the ground. He has other habits. It doesn't matter how much food I give him, he eats exactly half. Any food—from dried kibble to cooked steak. After each meal, he does exactly two and a half nose-to-the-ground circuits around the house before settling down on his bed in the den. My brother Robert and I had a babysitter once with OCD—

she couldn't put us to bed without unplugging all the appliances. She had a particular problem with toasters. Eventually, her family put her on medication, because she was driving around with the Black and Decker four-slice in her trunk: it was the only way she could be sure it wasn't on.

There are about thirty humans in the park today—mostly older women with Yorkies or Poodles, some young couples with labs or shepherds, and one pink jump-suited young woman with a Maltese. Carl's ears perk up, maybe for the first time ever. He stares down the Maltese.

“He's neutered, right?” I say.

“Neutered, not dead,” Gregg says.

I unhook his leash and he casts his drooped eyes at Gregg. Gregg pats him on the behind. “Go on, boy. Cause some trouble.” Carl trots over to the Maltese, sits. The woman in the pink jumpsuit pets him, and he lets her. She calls back in our direction. “Can he have treats?”

“Sure,” Gregg says. “His name's Carl.”

“Hi, Carl!” she says, and puts down two small biscuits in front of him. He eats one. The Maltese trots over to me. Gregg had a Maltese growing up, named Snowball. His mother swaddled the dog in uniforms: *policeman*, *fireman*, *sailor*, always with the same oversized red bow grafted to his head. Her favorite was a sailor suit—a white linen frock with side gussets and a blue jean collar. I asked Gregg how he felt about his mother's public-servant fetish. He brushed me off. “I didn't mind the uniforms,” he said. “But what the fuck's with the bow?” Snowball never barked and Gregg said it was because he was ashamed.

This Maltese is nude, except for a pink collar with diamond studs. “What's her name?” I say.

“Edie. She's two.”

I stroke Edie's fur. Her long white coat is soft and whisper thin, her heart pounding through her chest, a butterfly in a paper cup. I count. One minute, one hundred twenty beats. An animal heart gets a billion beats and in two years she's gone through about one-hundred twenty-six million. I stroke her fur and she shakes, a barely perceptible shiver. *You've got life pretty comfortable*, I think. *Just sit pretty and don't fuck it up.*

As if hearing my thoughts she looks up, defiant. She takes off running, and Carl lopes after her. Gregg looks at the two of them, in the distance. "He doesn't stand a chance," he says.

#

It's early evening. Rudy from Gregg's firm got promoted, so the partners are taking him for drinks. "Guys' night," Gregg said. "No wives."

Carl's already asleep in the den, and I'm in bed watching sitcoms on mute. Rather, I'm concentrating on the lights and shadows on the walls. They are formless, erratic, a dance of ghosts. Abstract shapes float in the room, in the yard, in the sky. I follow them, invisible, weightless, until something slams me back into myself. I am sitting bolt upright. My heart knocks against my ribs, a desperate bid to break through my chest wall. There's yelping, downstairs. Carl. Sometimes I'll find him caught in the doggie door, or tangled up in his own leash. I lie down and will my heartbeat to slow, conjuring tropical islands, sea swells, rainforest canopies, anything. I unmute the TV and an infomercial promises eternal wealth.

Gregg's side of the bed is still made. The clock reads 2:17 AM. I toss his pillow across the room. He's been staying out all night every weekend. Our marriage is a sham, so what do I care? I put on my robe and maneuver through the dark hallway. When I get to the bottom of the

stairs, Carl is there, another shadow in the dim room. “What did you do this time?” I say. At this, he retreats to the corner. He’s limping. Finally, he lies down.

I turn on the kitchen light, and the first thing I notice is blood. A pool lies on the floor beneath the small window by the front door. The window has been smashed, the glass blanketing the hardwood. Bloody paw tracks form circles, dozens and dozens of them, around the entire house.

The front door is open slightly. Whoever broke in smashed the window and reached a hand in to undo the deadbolt. The home theater system, Gregg’s stereo equipment, and the flat-screen TV are gone.

Carl whimpers softly from his spot in the corner. I go over to him and lift his paw, and he yelps. A big shard of glass is wedged between his toes. I wrap his foot in a towel. The blood on the floor is Carl’s.

I call Gregg. “Where are you? Bars are closed.”

“We’re over Rudy’s house,” he says, slurring. “I’m probably going to crash here.” He’s more than a little drunk.

“I need you to come home.”

“What, now, suddenly?” Gregg says. He’s agitated, self-righteous. Gearing up for the practiced speech he finally gets to use.

I cut him off. “Forget all that. Come home.”

“Why?”

“To take Carl to the emergency clinic.”

When Gregg walks in, I'm already talking to the cops—an officer with a paunch and no neck. Gregg glares at me, his face unreadable. He's not staggering, so the combination of broken dog plus broken house must have sobered him up. He lifts Carl and leaves without a word. The officer wants serial numbers I don't have and pictures I've not taken. His tone is flat, bored. I hand him an itemized list of the missing.

"I'm gonna be honest," he says. "I see home invasions like this twice a week. You're never gonna see this stuff again."

"No chance?" I say.

"Five percent," he says.

"Five percent? So you see home invasions twice a week and Coral Gables has 42,000 people, which means about a hundred road cops, and if each of you sees a home invasion twice per week, then out of the 10,400 invasions a year, you solve 520 of them? Or are you just telling me to piss off?"

The deputy hands me a copy of the report to sign, his mouth set into a grim line. "You're gonna want to nail up that window."

When Gregg returns carrying Carl an hour later, I'm sitting stock still in the dark living room. A handcrafted mahogany serving tray is nailed to the hole where the window used to be.

Carl has a bandage on his paw and a cone around his neck. He looks unfazed. Gregg sets him down and gets a beer from the fridge. "Why don't we have an alarm system, again?"

"I thought Carl was our alarm system."

"Don't start," he says, chugging his beer. Before we met, Gregg drank only once in a while.

“The men were in our house and he didn’t even bark. Not once. He only yelped when he stepped in glass. He’s useless. He hates me, and you’re never here.”

“We’re not getting rid of Carl.” Gregg runs his hands through his hair, looking drained.

“Those men could have shot us. They could have been here to rape me, and Carl wouldn’t have blinked.”

“He’s old. What, you’d rather they have killed him? They might have broken his neck.”

I look Gregg in the eyes. They’re bloodshot, puffy. He’s older than his 36 years. “The dog’s neurotic. He’d probably have been better off.”

“We’re not getting rid of Carl.” Gregg picks him up and heads to the guest bedroom.

At night, abstract shapes become burglars, crouching in the dark. I wake with my heart racing as fast as a hummingbird’s wings, a jackhammer. I feel it deep inside: bonds loosening, threads snapping. I’m on the brink of cardiac arrest, insanity.

A week after Gregg moves into the guest room, I walk to the ice cream stand and order a double fudge cone. I taste nothing, but I prolong the sensation of the cold on my tongue, against my cheeks. I walk five blocks more until I reach the library.

In the nonfiction section I find some books about health. My mother had panic attacks. They happened out of the blue—one minute she’d be reading a romance novel on the couch and the next she’d be sheet-white and gulping air like she’d been running. She’d put Robert and me in front of some cartoons and shut herself in her room.

“Going to use the treadmill,” she’d say. My parents did have an Endurance TF31 in their bedroom, but *using the treadmill* became the code for her disorder, which she refused to learn about, much less name, until years later. When I was fifteen and my father came home late once

again, the juices of some tight young co-ed on his hands, she lost her shit and stabbed her hand with a butter knife. Shortly after that, she was diagnosed, medicated.

I pick up a book called *Eradicating Fear*. As an afterthought I grab *Raising a Dog* and head toward the circulation desk. At the end of the aisle are books about science. Rows and rows of dusty tomes on chemistry and earth science and medicine and biology. On the end of the fourth shelf, next to the wall, is a section on cosmology. *What's the harm, really?* I run my fingers over the spines. *There is no harm*. By the time I reach P I've convinced myself that avoiding thinking about or talking about or reading about him has only been giving him more power over me. *I can handle this*. The air in here is too thick. "Workout time," I say to no one. His books are there, all of them. I pick up the last one: *Bridging the Void, The Story of Everything*. I've read a few of the others—before he was dead, before he was dead to me—but not this one. Robert used to call it *The Story of Nothing*. On the back jacket: blue eyes and lopsided smile, like mine.

#

I set up camp on the patio with the book, two bottles of wine, and a bag of Cheetos. Gregg and Carl are somewhere else. "Who needs your approval?" I say, to no one. "I'm *pondering existence*." All of my father's books are on black hole research. This one is as well but has grander designs—it's his treatise on genesis, creation, the origin of the universe. I open the first few pages and check out the dedication info. In small letters in the center of the page it says: "To my family." I gulp down the rest of my wine and pour another glass.

The work is overly technical, full of jargon, and prone to melodramatic navel-gazing, but so are all his others. At least this one cuts right to the quick. The cosmos according to Richard

Pierson: Our universe coexists with millions and billions of other universes. There is no one *Big Bang*, but an infinite number of comparatively smaller bangs, worlds ebbing and flowing, spawning from each other, drawing one another's energy then expanding with gusto before collapsing, spent. There is no beginning of time. Time is eternal. Other scientists have suggested various theories of the multiverse and he expounds mildly, driving his mass-manufactured sedan of an idea down the highway of their insights.

Then, he veers off a cliff. He says our own universe is much older than people think. Much older. *Much*. Its birth from an infinitely small point, the same sort of singularity that exists at the center of every black hole, happened much longer ago than scientists believe. Scientists assert the universe is just over 13 billion years old. This assertion is no longer debated—it has been proven, and few disagree with it. Few, except Richard. He claims the initial rate of inflation—the transition from nothing to everything, everywhere—was much quicker. Most scientists believe in hypothetical energy called *dark energy*, which they think is causing the present universe to expand. Richard believed he had proven without a doubt this exotic energy's existence. He believed it's much more prevalent, even from the beginning, much more peculiar than anyone could imagine, in fact making the early universe shoot and spread like buckshot from a gun.

He also claims to have done something else, something even more brash: developed a theory of quantum gravity. Quantum gravity is one of science's Holy Grails, the link between the infinitely large and the infinitely small, the world as we see it and the world that existed in the halcyon days of the birthing universe. Here it is, a unified description of everything in existence, explained neatly, packaged in cellophane and tied with a shiny red ribbon. Richard is sure to lay

out all the previous fits and starts from the rest of the scientific community. Teams and teams and teams of scientists have been trying for nearly a century to incorporate gravity into the realm of tiny, erratic sub-atomic particles, but this micro-science is hard to test and nearly impossible to prove. Here's my father, with his swagger and his smirk and his squeeze-to-the-crotch arrogance, claiming to have done it all by himself. The bastard had a way with an argument. He once, for fun, claimed to the neighbor that wombats were eating his wife's vegetables. The man was out there every day, picking up ruined carrots and zucchini, swearing under his breath about his wife's incessant whining. The neighbor was a know-it-all himself, possessive of his wife but much more gruff, less educated, less charming than my father. So, he sneered whenever my father came outside. Wombats are native to Australia. They are not found in the United States, much less rural northeastern Connecticut. Yet my father talked of exotic pet markets and unscrupulous store owners and after a few over-the-fence lessons, the man was out there setting up a cardboard box propped on a stick and "wombat bait," otherwise known as Snickerdoodles and M&M Peanuts.

The first bottle of wine is empty so I uncork the second. I give up reading and start mindlessly flipping through pages, searching for equations, testing them. Everything seems to be working. I will the math to break down. After two hours and two bottles of wine, it does. Or, I do. I lose focus until darkness, a beautiful, quiet darkness, pervades everything. Then, light. Glowing strings of letters and symbols soar like comets, leaving white-hot trails in their wake. I chase them down, qualifying, quantifying, cursing the sky as minutes pass, years, millennia. Around me, in spite of me, stars are forming, planets, civilizations. I scream and on cue the

machine of creation stops. Galaxies, worlds, life forms fall in space into a point that's infinitely small, until space is gone, too.

I'm awake. I fumble for a pen and transcribe onto paper the fury of activity that's been playing all night in my head. There's a problem with his math. The last few pages of equations yield impossible solutions or solutions that prove him wrong outright. He's a fraud. I want to yell, dance, sing, but there's too much pressure in my skull, my eyes throbbing against the first rays of sunlight filtering into the patio. Instead I stand up slowly and head to the guest bedroom. I can't tell Gregg what I've found, but I can tell him something. I'll make this marriage work, after all. It has to work, because I need this life, because I'm not my father, because I'm domestic and uncomplicated and good. I stop suddenly, stumbling over my own feet because I'm full of shit, just like him.

I nudge open the door. Gregg isn't here, or Carl for that matter. The bed is made, and the dressers are open and empty.

REMINGTON STEELE

Robert keeps his head down as he walks down the street, the cold wind lifting his T shirt, slicing the folds of his exposed belly. He's planning to die, later. At 6:55 PM, he'll take a shock-bath with a weather radio. There's glory in electrocution. After his old man got plowed by lightning, when Robert was six, the whole town showed at the hospital, and the man who was already a myth became a legend. Old lady Wheeler even thought touching him could clear up her rheumatism. She's a nut job. Robert in no way, shape, or form wants to answer to or get mauled by nut jobs. Besides, there's way more glory in death.

This Connecticut June doesn't make sense—it's windy and brisk, more like October. At the bus stop, gnarled oaks hunker over the lone bench, in a row like guards. He sits. No one else is here. His sister Darla gets rides from her friends, not that he'd want to ride with them anyway. The last time Darla and her friends drove him to junior high they didn't say one word to him the entire time, not until they reached the high school and remembered they'd forgotten to drop him off.

The old yellow bus spits and chokes up the road. It sputters to a stop. He climbs in, and all the girls along the way silently continue declining to 1) look at his face 2) kiss his mouth 3) fondle the bulge that's permanently in his jeans. He can't control his parts anymore. Today, he's wearing three pairs of Hanes briefs.

He sits behind Leslie Halverson, who's a grade ahead of him. She looks out the window, bored with the bus and the world and boredom itself. The delicate arch of her jawbone gives way to the soft lines of her cheek, framing her softly frowning lips. Boredom holds power. He shifts

in his Hanes. Robert tried to look bored on the bus once. He unfocused his eyes and dropped his jaw. He even lopped his head to one side. The aide offered him a puke bag.

Leslie twirls her smooth blond hair in her fingers. Will she show at his funeral? He's tried to conjure her in his fantasy. She walks by Saxton's First Presbyterian Church on Sumtner, where inside, Robert's body is bravely laid out. She sees the crowd of mourners. She is above it all, glorious, unaffected. Robert wears her apathy, down in his bones.

The walls of the bus expand and contract. Some girl with a pointy chin a few rows up is pulling food out of her retainer. A boy with a *Toy Story* bookbag is chewing on a pencil. Who are these people? Everything moves in slow motion. These people don't matter. Robert steps toward Leslie's seat. He studies her delicate features and imagines those delicate features forming a snarl, and what is he going to say, anyway? *I've tried to talk to you a hundred times and chicken-shitted out, but I'll be dead tonight so you've got one last chance.* And what if she laughs at him, and he dies, and she feels bad? He doesn't want her to feel bad. She'll end up getting her head shrunk like his mother. He closes his eyes. The bus jerks to a halt. They've stopped at another house, and aide barks at him to *Sit down*. He stumbles and practically lands in Leslie's lap, hearing sharp intake of breath. Her arms cross. She's no longer bored. She's furious. "What the hell are you doing?"

The walls pulsate again and the retainer girl giggles and he thinks he might throw up, so he plays it cool. He gets low and conspiratorial. "I'm going to kill myself tonight."

"You're lying," she says, even though her gaped mouth says otherwise.

"Nope, 'fraid not."

First: “You’re that kid that sits at the back of the bus and never says anything, right? Then: Why are you going to kill yourself?” Next, without waiting for an answer: “How are you going to do it?”

“With a weather radio. To the tub.”

“What? How *gauche*.” She over-enunciates *gauche*, and Robert hopes it means something like *awesome*. “That won’t be pretty,” she says.

“Why not?”

“Because, you’re going to be all fried-looking. Like burned meatloaf.”

Robert pictures an unrecognizable lump of charred beef in the tub. He smiles.

“You should do it gracefully,” she says. “With pills.”

“How’s that graceful?”

“No blood.”

Robert pictures himself lying peacefully in his bed, empty pill bottle at his side. He’s disappointed. He doesn’t want graceful. He wants freak-show. “Yeah, I suppose I could do that, too.”

“Can I watch?” Leslie is staring at him intently, now. It’s more than he could have hoped for.

“Sure.” He tries to sound calm. His heart quickens. “Whatever, if you feel like it.”

“Cool.”

“Come by tonight. Around six.” He writes down his address on her book cover. “And don’t tell anyone.”

He gets up to leave, and she holds his arm. He imagines all sorts of declarations emanating from her perfect lips. Love, regret. Instead, “What should I wear?”

He manages to keep his voice strong and even. “Wear black.”

Later, in science class, Robert can’t concentrate. He thinks of Leslie, of impending glory, death. His teacher calls on him to name the taxonomic ranks. It’s the only question all semester he’s known the answer to, *Kingdom Phylum Class Order Family Genus Species*, because his mother made him memorize Kindly Please Come Over For Great Spaghetti. He opens his mouth, triumphant. He can’t speak. His lips hold back cotton, leaves, rocks. His heart pounds, hard. He thinks about it pounding and it pounds even harder. He wills it to explode. For a wild instant he fantasizes about torching himself with the Bunsen Burner and going up like dried leaves. They’d talk about him for years, decades. He looks down until his teacher sighs and calls on the kid next to him, who is doodling pictures of dragons. For the remainder of class he is worked up. He jumps when sunlight shines in his eyes, not sunlight at all but siren lights, swirling and flashing as cops drag him off to the loony bin.

In English class they conjugate ridiculous verbs, *jump* and *fly* and *skip* and *chew*. No one ever conjugates verbs that matter. The big verbs, like *love* and *die*. Robert *loves* Leslie. Robert *will die*. Robert never volunteers in English class, but today he’s not-volunteering quite loud, and he hopes they notice. He finishes his note. The most important thing a suicider needs is a note. He’s been doing and re-doing the wording for weeks, culling the words from a soap opera magazine he found in his sister’s room. Toward the end, it says: “I’ve had it with life’s vicissitudes.” He imagines, at first, that a vicissitude means something cool and dark, like *nastiness*. He figures, though, that he better check, so he doesn’t write an ignorant note. He

sneaks open his pocket dictionary. It turns out, all it means is *changes*. Too flowery anyway, he thinks. He scratches off *vicissitudes* and puts *nastiness*.

At the end of the day he ditches the bus. The air smacks his face, hard, making him gasp, giving him chills. He wills the sunlight to warm his face. The heat doesn't reach him, doesn't touch the ice in his blood. He runs. The cold sends prickly jolts through his fingers and chills the sweat down his back. His legs ache and his lungs wheeze and soon he is forced to walk.

When he enters the kitchen, he finds his mother sitting at the table. "Robbie, you're home. How was school?" She's wearing a blue dress with gold earrings and her hair is up.

"Fine." When he speaks lately, he is careful never to sound interested in the conversation.

"Anything worthwhile happen?"

"No."

"Nothing at all, huh?"

"Nope."

"You used to tell me about your day."

"When I was a kid, maybe."

Her nose crinkles. "Didn't mean to offend you, old timer." He's hurt her feelings. Serves her right. She twirls a loose piece of hair, a gold shiny spring, all shut-up in hairspray. His mother is beautiful, but she doesn't make sense. Like a lot of her paintings with cows in the middle of an ocean, whales in a desert. She wears makeup every day even though she stays in the house, except to bring her work down to the gallery. She dresses up every day even though Robert's father wouldn't look at her sideways if she was on fire. She's always ready, for nothing

in particular. Like the sky's going to open up at any moment, whack her with a piano, and she'd rather the paramedics don't haul her away in a frumpy robe.

She cups her chin in her hand. Is she sad? No, not sad. Robert doesn't think she ever gets sad. She looks out the window. Bored, then? What's with all these women, above it all?

"I'm expecting a friend for dinner," he says.

She jerks her head back toward him. "You are, huh. Who?"

"My friend Leslie."

"Leslie, huh. I don't know this Leslie." She scolds him with her eyes but can't contain her smile. "A dinner date. I guess you're growing up." She springs to her feet and ushers him out of the kitchen. "Shoo. I'm going to start the roast." Robert is grateful that she's forgotten to bother him about his day.

His sister Darla is on the living room couch, wearing big boots and a tight shirt, eating Cheetos. She's watching some *National Geographic* special about snakes. He stands in front of her. "Move it," she says.

"You move it," he says.

"Go away," she says.

"You go away," he says.

"Seriously, go play with your little friends. I'm waiting for Doug to come over."

"So he can fuck you," he says, goading her.

"Yes, so he can fuck me. *Fucking* is something you'll never do, with anyone besides you. Go whack off again to Mom's JC Penney catalogs."

In his mind he punches the glass coffee table. It shatters in a million little pieces, shards cutting the air, blanketing Darla's Cheetos. She'd probably eat a piece of glass, to prove she could. "I bet you'll miss me when I'm gone," he says, low and quiet.

"Go away right now, and I'll be sure to remember to miss you."

"Say hi to Doug. Tell him I said congratulations on the easy lay."

Darla leaps off the couch, quick as a cat, and punches him in the thigh. The pain sears through his nerves—deep, down to the bone. He stumbles back. She could have punched anywhere, in the arm. Does she know what he's been up to? The cutting? Her eyes flutter down, then up to his. She doesn't know. She's surprised. At herself? At him? He refuses to cry. "Robert..." she says. The pain is like a Bic lighter being dragged back and forth and back and forth over his skin. It feels awful, wonderful.

His dad is in the room. He hadn't seen him enter. How much has he seen? His eyes flash, wide and angry, over small, handsome features, set into a grim line. Someone head-bending smart has no right being good looking. "What's going on here?"

He's been working in his basement office all day, and now he's here, like clockwork, to watch Remington on the classic channel. His wrinkled dress shirt hangs on his frame. Robert wonders if there is anything underneath, any muscle at all. His black hair rises to a steep slope, as if he's been raking it with his nails. Robert's thigh pulses with each heartbeat.

Darla's eyes are wide, her smugness gone. "I punched him. Hard, too hard."

"Why?"

"The adrenaline was going."

Of course her reason is biological, scientific. Her father's daughter. After the man got struck by lightning, she went around explaining the science of "electrical discharges into humans," crowing about how their father was "one in seven-hundred thousand." As the local papers and neighbors came around, Robert laid low. Fine, Robert's dad is a genius scientist, great, he is tops of his fellow eggheads at UConn. The town even asked him to serve on some damn board or other for a while, which was ridiculous. *Lightning struck him, he didn't do* anything. He and his mother and Darla and Robert were simply vacationing at the lake, his father doing nothing more heroic than ogling some bikini chick all day. At the dawn of a storm Robert and his mother and Darla went to the car and at the last second Darla went back to the beach for their father, witnessed the electricity leave the heavens and pierce his waterlogged, sun-ravaged chest. The lightning flashed around him, lit him up like a roman candle. Singed his skin, stopped his heart. Darla watched him lay on his back until Robert and his mother got there and paramedics shocked him back to life. To her, his status was cemented as God. Some God—he was nothing more than lightning's bitch.

His father sighs, pulls his fingers through his hair. "I'm not in the mood for this. Darla, go upstairs."

"For how long? I have a date later, remember?"

"Not anymore. Go."

"What?"

"You heard me. Go."

She blinks and mumbles and in a whirl she is gone, stomping up the stairs, cursing. His father rarely disciplines Darla. Robert had not expected this. His heart skips a few beats, and he

is instantly ashamed for being so weak. He tries to breathe, to dislodge the fist from his chest. His father sits on the couch, exhales loudly. He turns to Robert, regards him with hooded lids. He looks tired, suddenly old.

“Why don’t you sit?” his father says.

Robert’s heart skips again. “Sit?”

“Yeah, sure. Remington’s on in a few, part two of two. Watch with me.”

His father never asks him to watch Remington. Darla maybe, but not him. Does he know something is up? Did Leslie’s parents call him? No, then his mother would know, too. He just punished Darla, so he needs someone to watch TV with, that’s all. Robert is edged-out, too alert, his skin stretched taut on his muscles. His thigh is prickly, itchy, teeming with ants. “No, I have some stuff to do.”

“It can wait. Sit.”

His dad’s stare levels him, and he drops to the couch. Too many emotions Robert can’t understand stir inside him, fixed in his father’s gaze. “How are you doing?” his father says, studying him.

“Fine.”

“Fine?”

“Fine.”

“What’d you do in school?”

For a moment, Robert is lost. He could lie, make up something. Something small. *I won a spelling bee.* Something bigger. *I won a Nobel Prize.* He almost blurts out *I told this girl I love*

that I'm going to kill myself today. If he does this, his plan is done. Off to the rubber room with no windows.

“I had science class. We learned about *taxonomy*.” Robert says the word slowly, savoring it, being sure to pronounce it right.

“Aah yes!” His father’s whole face lifts, a flipped switch. “Linnaean taxonomy. The scientific ranks. Carolus Linnaeus, the *Systema Naturæ*. Ahead of its time, for the 18th century. What have you learned?” His father’s eyes glow with such intensity, so hotly focused on Robert’s response, that Robert thinks he might melt away, dissolving into the couch.

Robert clears his throat. He finds his voice, faltering and small. “Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species.”

Robert’s father smiles. “That’s good. It’s important that you know about hierarchies in nature. The world’s full of them. There’s more order than chaos, if you know where to look.”

“Yeah, true.” Robert allows himself a grin. His father suddenly thinks he is smart. He stares at his father, expectantly, but Remington has started. Another switch, flipped. The man stares at the TV, and Robert falls away. Remington Steele saves the world, does stuff way more important than memorizing a dumb list of seven things. His dad does important things: discovers black holes and billion-year-old galaxies surrounding them. His sister Darla does important things: wins math scholarships, calculates six thousand twenty-two times four-hundred-forty million in a beat of a moth’s wing.

Robert tries to be Darla. He reads his textbooks over and over, until the letters swim in his vision, until shame builds, layer on layer, like the squeezed-fist of gasses in one of his dad’s quasars or suns. The pressure releases with each cut of his straight razor, easing back to the

universe with each slash to his thighs. But Robert can still do important things. He can summon the heavens, pulling electricity into him until it jolts his whole body stiff, sizzling, crisping like bacon in oil. He goes upstairs to wait for Leslie.

#

Robert waits until six-thirty, but Leslie doesn't show. He goes back downstairs and asks his mother about her. She promises to tell him as soon as the girl arrives. He's getting antsy, because dinner starts at seven, right after Remington. Everyone will be in to wash up soon. He waits until six-forty and begins to panic. He is sure that Leslie has told her parents and his plan is ruined. She's betrayed him. He can't wait any more.

He peels off his shoes and socks, placing them near the tub. He turns the faucet.

Last year Robert heard the story from this guy about a sad housewife who took a bath with a hair dryer. What did that feel like? he asked. Did it hurt? What did she look like afterward? Yeah, it hurt. No, they couldn't recognize her. Not at all. Charred beyond recognition.

Robert has never been shocked. He has never stuck his tongue on a battery or forgot to dry his hands before turning off a switch. He did almost drown, once. When he was two his inflatable raft broke and he sunk like a stone in the shallow pool, before bobbing to the surface. He doesn't remember anything, except in his mind's eye. There he is at once cold and heavy, like a boat anchor, or a skater breaking through ice. The water burns his eyes and floods his throat. His sister says he didn't move at all, but in his dreams he splashes around, flailing, choking.

The Sanyo 8S-P3 sits on the shelf of towels. He picks it up. It looks like a used car battery, or a bomb. Rust coats the lunchbox-sized metal rectangle in pock marks from bottom to top. Two D-cells leak acid out of the battery compartment. His father had bought the thing when

Robert was little, so the family could listen to the weather during emergencies. Only one emergency ever came up. A hurricane that lasted two hours, before collapsing into nothing. Mostly, Robert's mother just plugs it in and listens to AM while she sings in the shower. Robert moves it to the tub's ledge. He'd much prefer to use his boombox, which has a CD player, maybe fry himself to some guitar riffs. But, he learned about *symbolism* in English class. The third most important thing a suicider needs, besides a note, is a *symbol*.

The tub water hovers two inches from the rim. Robert turns on the radio's power. Grainy static fills the room. He turns off the sound, checks that the plug is tucked firmly in the socket. He pulls a long piece of string from his pocket, ties it to the Sanyo's handle. He places the folded-up note on the counter near the sink.

He looks at his watch: 6:45. He dips a toe. The water is too warm and his toe is too cold, so his submerged skin feels like fire. He steps in, touches smooth ceramic. His jeans cling to his shin. His leg feels like an anchor is pulling it down, down. He lifts in the other leg. He sits, the water rises. Both his thighs pulse and sting, and the cuts Robert has made, thoughtfully, diligently, every day after school, fill with water: cleansed, purified, new. Water skims the top of the tub, a hair's breadth below the radio.

Robert breathes in, out, in, out. His thicket of underwear has a vice-grip on his testicles. He shifts. That sick, choking feeling creeps up once more, and suddenly he's back at the pool, and this time it is deep—twelve feet at least—and he's once again sinking toward the bottom. What does *beyond recognition* look like, he wonders. Will he still have a face? Will his eyes melt together? Maybe he'll cause a power spike. Maybe the whole neighborhood will go down. He pictures his sister and mother and Leslie standing over his body, his lifeless husk of

waterlogged beef, their jaws slack with shock. His mother's eyes close, cheeks ball up, turn ugly. He shivers, returns to his skin. He doesn't want Leslie to show, after all. He doesn't want any of them to see this. This wasn't meant for them. His heart is beating fast, too fast. He imagines that the pain, blinding, is everything, and it's done, he's done.

Robert looks at his watch again: 6:55. It's now or never, since the family will be banging on the door soon.

He grips the string tight, the power of life and death in his hands. He lets it diffuse through him, takes a deep breath, dips under the water. He is drifting at the bottom of the ocean, floating with the fish and the lichen—pronounced *lie-ken*, not *lit-chin*—and the hairdryer lady and the darkness and Remington Steele, all suave and brave and British. Robert's thighs scream and his eyes sting but his vision is clear and so he lets go of the string. He doesn't go through with it. He doesn't need to. Across town, a few minutes ago, Leslie chickened out, hugging her knees together in her room, gaze fixed on the wall. You'd think she were bored, if it weren't for the slight quiver of her lip. She ends up telling her parents all about Robert's plan. Her parents immediately call Robert's father, who turns white, drops the phone.

Once, at dinner, Robert's mother asked Robert what his science teacher thought of his mini-marshmallow/embroidery-floss model of an atom. Robert blathered on excitedly, in vain. Robert's father remained quiet, like he usually did after Robert was done talking. Far beyond that—like now, lost in his own thoughts, although now his thoughts might have something to do with Robert.

A thousand years or a second later, when his father enters, reaches a rippling, grasping hand forward, eyes darting around, genius-brain playing catch-up for once, taking in as much as

he can but not even close to everything, Robert has summoned the heavens and held them back, away, his mind focused, alert, waiting.

THE STORY OF NOTHING, PART II

Gregg is gone. Carl is gone. Carl's food and toys and Gregg's clothes are gone.

A fury Darla doesn't recognize begins slowly, gradually, as the day wanes and shadows mar the surface of her sterile white walls. She didn't think he would leave. Not really. Her identity crafted from bits of the lives of others, she's not sure who—maybe characters from movies, or Fifties sitcoms, more like—this self is dissolving. With the loss of her marriage it will disappear completely, and she fears the Darla that will form in its place. Or, even worse: the Darla that's here now, has been here all along.

She gets dressed and doesn't know where to go. There's no one to call. Her friendship with the wife is dead, starved from neglect. The rest of the wives are part of Gregg's world and his alone. She takes a walk.

As she reaches the park, a fit young man walks by, in pressed, loose khaki shorts and an impossibly crisp polo. He clearly put in some effort to look effortless, and he eyes her own efforts: Lycra biking shorts with no panty lines, tank top with a deep V-neck. She smiles and he stops, grins, leers. His look belongs to an older, practiced womanizer, his father maybe, but makes her stomach flutter just the same, a nice change from its usual twisting ache. The man's bedroom is small and musty, with stiff sheets and posters of full-frame boobs only vaguely attached to women. He is suddenly a sheepish college-kid, full of explanations, which she doesn't hear. She fucks him, concentrates only on his various pressures, getting up immediately afterward and walking out the front door.

She walks home, the last of him thick and uncomfortable between her legs, trying to decide who to blame for the failure of her marriage. Try as she might she can't bring herself to

blame Gregg, who was simply in over his head. So, she blames the person that set her crisis in motion: her brother Robert. After she deleted his voicemail a year ago—the evidence that she was once a different person, wasn't in fact a sweet, innocent dullard—she had tried to put it out of her mind. This was a mistake. She should have called him back immediately, told him to piss off. She didn't exorcise the demon, so it has lived on the fringes of her consciousness, possessing her, sending her into a fugue state, making her weak.

Darla goes to the bank and finds that Gregg has left his fortune untouched. She draws out enough to live on for a while, and just like that she awakes in a Connecticut motel room with deer on the wallpaper. Brown and white bucks stare big-eyed, indignant, their heads rifle-still. She turns, shuts them out.

No one is outside when she leaves the room, and the heat makes her arms sticky. She's forgotten the intensity of Connecticut summers, when temperatures reach highs that put even South Florida to shame. When she was young, their mother refused to get an air conditioner, instead opening windows and sometimes running three box fans in one room. "The air just needs to *circulate*," she'd say. Darla turns on the A/C in her rental car and sticks her face into the blast. Also forgotten: thrill-park roads. She winds and weaves toward town, ending up queasy.

Town is a Main Street and oak trees, sedans, an elderly man in overalls and a short-sleeved plaid shirt, a young mother in a sundress pushing a simple stroller, a few teens shrouded in black, sitting on the curb instead of in school at 10 AM on a Tuesday. A Laundromat stands next to a bowling alley, liquor store, diner, convenience store, grocery store. Further down Main Street are an elementary school and a cemetery that is hundreds of years old. Nothing has

changed since her childhood, but she feels no nostalgia. Today, she feels nothing. Maybe she won't be recognized. She swats at mosquitoes that feed on her spicy perfume.

Darla wanders until she ends up in the gazebo in the center of town. She calls her brother on her cell, in a matter-of-fact way, and he mock-yells at her, in a pleased and surprised way. He invites her to dinner tomorrow night and she accepts, and he's about to say more but she makes an excuse and hangs up quickly, watching tiny gray-blue shapes off in the distance. The shapes are workers filing out of a factory, some heading toward Main Street, some climbing a hill toward trees that flank a neighborhood. She stops watching the workers when a man sits down next to her.

"You're Darla Pierson, right?" he says, after staring for a few seconds.

"No, I'm not."

He stares, hard, for a few more seconds.

"You are, you're Darla Pierson."

"Do *I* know *you*?" she says, trying not to look put out.

"Does anyone know anyone, really?"

"Yes. People know other people. Do I know you?"

"You and I...dated."

Which Darla knows means they fucked. She studies his black curls and hard brown eyes. She tries to picture him ten years younger, with maybe longer hair and fewer lines on his forehead and around his mouth, comes up with nothing. "Were we in the same class?"

"We used to grab a cigarette together before homeroom."

She tries again and then she sees it—the scrawny, squirrely boy with ripped jeans and metal T-shirts. He earned detentions and expulsions for a you-name-it list of offenses, including lighting the girls’ regional softball championship banner on fire in the gym. One morning they got high and didn’t make it to any of their classes all day. Instead they went to the woods. He was sleepy, awkward. It didn’t matter. The weed was good shit and she was only vaguely aware of things he did to her body.

“Phil Tallis,” she says. He is still wearing ripped jeans, but today he has on a plain black T-shirt with a small bleach stain on the neck. His work shirt, probably his good one. “How’s it going.”

“Working in the *Quik Mart*. It’s not good pay, but hey, at least the hours are terrible.”

She nods. He lights a cigarette and offers her one. She takes it, inhales.

“What are you doing back here?” he says. “I thought you died.”

“Who said I died?”

“Your brother, after high school. Said you were in a better place now.”

She laughs, without malice. “Coral Cables is *not* a better place, but that’s where I’ve been.”

He nods, looks neutrally at her and then the street. “Wow, that’s harsh.”

“Not surprising, I’m dead to the family.”

“Yeah,” he says, as if he understands such matters. “That’ll happen.”

“I have an idea,” she says.

She and Phil fuck in his trailer community’s tiny laundry room, on one of the washers. She needs to feel something, and why not this?

This time, he is a fantastic lover, or the pot is better. Sensations have no source, are broken loose in time, and she grips the metal lid, his skinny fingers digging into her thighs. His face contorts with pleasure and something like fury, shock. Afterward, in his place, Phil passes out. She takes a joint from his nightstand. Immediately, she knows why she quit getting high. Heart, thumping. Little packets of TNT, exploding her chest, blowing pinholes through her heart, lungs, stomach. She's dying. She can't die, here, in a pothead's apartment in Nowhere, Connecticut. She counts heartbeats, but that just makes things worse. Now a wave swells and crests, sends her sinking, deeper and deeper. She shuts herself in the bathroom and covers her head. She rocks back and forth, strains to take in air through lungs full of water.

Sometime later, Phil calls through the door. "Are you all right in there?" he says.

She doesn't answer and then there is silence, and she figures he's forgotten, or passed out again.

A few seconds later the door opens. He has kicked it in.

"Wow, that was very kung fu of you," she says, peering through folded knees.

"Come on out," he says.

He pulls her onto the couch.

"I'm dying, I think," she says.

"Me too," he says.

The next thing that happens, she wakes on the floor with his arm draped across her. She lights a cigarette, shakes him.

"Hey, you lived," he says, through bits of sleep.

She feels no relief from continually escaping death, again and again being convinced of the end, again and again being proven wrong. A lumpy knot sits in her chest. She inhales, takes a swig of beer. For the first time, she looks around. He has a poster on the wall, and in the center, larger than life, is the palm of a hand. It says, "Palm Sunday." Then underneath, "Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday." He lifts her wrist and splays her fingers. "Your love line is short and your head line is long but broken. You're shitty at relationships, inconsistent in your thoughts."

"Seriously?"

"Yup. Palmistry." At her look, he says, "Hey, Saxton's a slow town. It was this or heroin."

She swills some more beer. "I'm going to go visit my brother. Wanna come?"

"You serious?" he says, pursing his mouth. "The town minister? You want to bring me as your date? What, you trying to screw him?" He has more lines on his forehead than she originally thought. Not just there and around his mouth, but spidering out from his eyes, too, tiny dry grooves. She counts them until he says, "Okay, what else am I gonna do."

That evening they drive over hills as big as moons and Darla is queasy again when they arrive at Robert's house, at the end of a long driveway, looming three-floors tall, enshrouded in trees. She and Phil reach the covered stoop and she rings the doorbell. The chimes are ones that play a whole song, something from another era, and she wants to leave a flaming bag of shit and run around the side of the house and hide. She laughs, ridiculously.

"What's funny?" Phil says.

"Ever leave a flaming bag of shit?" she says.

“Not in a long time” he says, and he’s matter-of-fact, maybe too much so.

A woman with expressive eyes, a sleek pant suit, and painted nails answers the door. She grins like a genuinely happy person. Darla grins, too, wills the two shots of vodka she downed in the car to help her put feeling into it.

“You must be Darla,” she says, and looks at Phil.

“This is Phil,” Darla announces.

“Of course. I think I’ve seen you in town.”

Their front hall is expansive, with burnt-gold drapes so soft they’re almost liquid, streaming from arched windows down huge walls and pooling on the floor. Robert walks in, wearing a smart navy sweater and cargo pants. He is slim, has a full beard and warm eyes. He shows no traces of scars, acne or other.

“Oh Jesus,” Darla says, and means it. He is the white-robed figure above their Grandmother’s kitchen table, exuding a peace that Darla didn’t trust, didn’t feel. Robbie never felt it, either, and she can’t believe he feels it now, deep down, the boy who slashed his thighs with a straight razor. Still, he has weathered the intervening years better than her, as she’s very aware that she stands here now with unwashed hair and trembling fingers.

“I’m glad to see you again,” he says. He steps forward and hugs her, and she lets him.

He introduces his wife, Kaitlyn, who he met in church after one of his sermons and immediately tasked to have first one, then two, children, now five and four. “They’re at Kaitlyn’s mom’s,” Robert says when she asks.

At dinner, Robert and Kaitlyn busy Phil and Darla with roasted chicken, which is dry and flavorless, and small talk, which is equally so. They talk about the weather and the elections and

the ten-pin bowling lanes, the first local business to go under in six years. They are both being extremely nice, and Darla feels a twinge of—what, disappointment? What was she expecting, really? Certainly not hospitality that builds into a kind of sick pressure inside. And not Phil, perfectly at ease schmoozing with the town minister and his wife. No one asks Phil about his past or Darla about her past, present, or future. If Robert and Kaitlyn know Darla is married, no one mentions the missing husband.

Afterward, Kaitlyn ushers them to a living room with high ceilings and too much furniture, at once expansive and claustrophobic. They sit on two adjoining leather couches and Phil nods to Darla and says to Robert, “So how long since you two talked?”

“Oh, twelve years,” Robert says.

“Brutal.”

“You have some sisters, don’t you, Phil?”

“Six.”

Darla hadn’t realized this. This explains a lot. So he’s used to abuse from women.

“That must have been rough,” Robert says.

“Eh, the scars are mostly psychological.”

Throughout their conversation, Darla is aware of her body. She’s conscious of every breath, every pulse of her blood in her throat. Her arms are tingling. Maybe it’s dehydration, she thinks. Maybe it’s just her new way of being.

“Speaking of psychological scars,” Darla interrupts, “how’s Mom? Still a Xanax zombie?”

“That’s harsh,” Robert says. “She’s been through some stuff.” He lightens his tone. “She’s better now. Rents a house near the center of town.” He meets her eyes. “I told her you were back.”

“That’s nice,” she says.

“That is nice,” Phil says.

“You should go see her,” Robert says. “She’d love to see you.”

“I doubt that’s true.” As their childhood advanced, their mother became a wraith: gaunt, fleeting. She crumbled into the background as her husband became legendary in life, then death.

“Of course it is,” Robert says, as if to one of his children.

“You don’t know her at all, do you?”

Robert widens his eyes, starts to speak, stops. Darla sees his struggle. He’s invited a tsunami to dinner, but he’ll be damned if he’s going to turn on all the fans in the house.

“You need to let it all go, Darla.”

“She’s very lovely,” Kaitlyn says.

Darla eyes the woman, for too long. Kaitlyn smiles quickly and enlists Phil’s help with the dinner dishes, and they move to the kitchen, wordlessly, stupidly. Darla heads out to the porch, expecting Robert to follow, and he does. The warm Connecticut night immediately restrains her like wool, as gauzy sheets of light move across the horizon.

“Storm over the hills. We’ve got a nice night, though,” Robert says.

“Yeah, I forgot how Connecticut had a knack for that. Nice nights. Take a slow breeze, administer an unhealthy dose of languor and crickets, and presto.”

The air is thick, and she smells ozone. Robert is thinking about it too, she knows. The family legacy, illuminated each time a routine cold spell smacks into a wall of warmth. The first time lightning struck their father, the town shat kittens. He was a devil, a demigod, a saint. Seven years later her brother took a long bath, stared too intently at the black cord running from the *Sanyo 8S-P3* on the counter to the wall, wondered if his heart would stop too, wondered if he, too, would be jolted back to odds-defying, hushed-whisperings-in-the-cafeteria-inducing, ripped-back-from-the-heavens, glorious life. The second time lightning struck their father, it lifted him, remembered, laughed, dropped him stone dead. The town gossiped, mourned. Robert went on his first date at the wake.

They stand at the railing for a while, without speaking. Finally, Darla says, “How did you find me? A year ago. How did you know where I was?”

“I looked on the Internet.”

“My phone number is on the Internet?”

“No, just a blurb. In the Coral Gables Gazette, about the marriage of one Gregg Williamson to one Darla Williamson née Pierson, sweet young daughter of Beth Pierson, housewife, and Jeremy Pierson, librarian, both hailing from Albuquerque, New Mexico. Your number is in the book. Librarian, really?”

“Should I have made him a priest?”

He ignores the question, instead says, “You weren’t trying all that hard to hide.”

“I didn’t think anyone would be looking.” So Gregg does know everything, after all. She says, “Why did you call? Why then?”

He props his elbows on the wood and forms his right hand around his left fist, the way he used to do when he was uncomfortable. “It’s been too long. I just wanted to talk to you. See you again.”

“Why? You never wanted to do either when you were a kid.”

“I’m not a kid anymore. Neither are you.”

“You ruined everything.”

He squeezes the fist, a small motion, barely perceptible. “What?”

“The call. I was trying to forget you. All of you.”

The left fingers are red, white in the creases. “So why are you here, now?”

She ponders this for a moment. Revenge, right? She’s not altogether sure. Maybe, she thinks with alarm, because she has no place else to be. She says, “I read Richard’s book.”

He turns and looks at her but says nothing.

“The great tome, the one that contains all the secrets of the universe.”

“Why now?”

“He was wrong, Robbie.”

“About what?”

“All of it.”

“Why’s it so important to you to prove him wrong, anyway? Let it go. You’re not him.”

“Really? Do you believe that?”

He pulls both hands apart and grips the railing. “Yes, you’re exactly like him,” he says, louder this time. “You are, you really are. Is that what you want me to say? So what, though? At

least Dad owned up to who he was. What happened to you? You've had a charmed life. What the hell is wrong?"

"God lets you talk like that?"

"I'm serious," he says, his face now every bit the raging little boy she remembers. "Why are you trying so hard to pick a fight?"

"Because you were a mess, all those years ago, just like me."

"You were a mess because you wanted to be a mess." His eyes shift toward the night. "You're trying to force some confrontation, to drag me back there with you, but it's not going to happen."

"Why not? Are you afraid that now that you've found God, you can't be honest?"

He exhales, louder than he needs to. "Maybe you should leave."

She got what he wanted—he's keyed up, angry, has abandoned his genial smile and newfound optimism. Victory is fleeting: hot pressure spreads from her chest to her fingers, rising to her neck, thinning out like a noose, strangling slowly. Can he tell? She fights it, plants her feet. She is in control. Robert is staring into the dark and she's grateful he's no longer looking at her.

She says, finally, "Why are your kids at their grandmother's?"

He doesn't answer, continues to stare at nothing. The lightning is gone, the storm having moved on or collapsed, impotent.

She heads to the car. A few minutes later someone thinks to send Phil out to her. She can't look at his horizon of face-lines, so she looks straight ahead as she drives away, dropping

him at his place without a word. Sometime later the room stops spinning under her, another victory.

HURRICANE

Inside, the air is stale—thick with dust that drops like snow in the thin light of a bulb that hangs naked from the hall ceiling. A window sits over the door, too small to let in much light through its uneven glass. Outside, the sky is white.

Right now is the calm. The storm, when it comes, will reach black fingers through basement walls and lift her children up, tossing them into a false night. Of this she is certain.

Most of the neighbors have left, except for a few who are braving it out and a few who aren't but are still loading up their cars. Although there is no official order to evacuate, the strong suggestion is to seek out friends and relatives on higher ground.

Kate's husband is in the living room. He is wearing brown. He owns an assortment of brown vests and pants that render him all but invisible in his brown easy chair. His black hair is enveloped in smoke, from a cigar he smokes only on special occasions.

He's watching the local weatherman gape at the satellite image on the screen of a spiraling grey blob over the Atlantic. Impressive looking arrows point north, some toward the middle of the state, some off to the sides. That puts the trajectory somewhere between *out to sea* and *beeline for Kate*. The weatherman goes on about "storm surges" and this number longitude and latitude. Something about "millibars." Big storms don't come up this way often, so this one's a big deal. Her husband says it's not. According to him, it's not enough to do any real damage.

"When are we going to grab the kids and go to the basement?" she says.

He looks at her, with tired eyes, flat behind his glasses. "I'm not worried."

"You can get some work done down there." At his silence: "You're not going sit here in your chair through a whole hurricane. You might fly away!"

“I’m not going to fly away.”

“You might!”

“No, I won’t.”

She returns to the window. In the yard, the neighbor’s cat is beside herself. The usually dainty and dignified animal is pacing around frantically, her black and orange tail puffing out like a feather duster. In their rooms, at Kate’s insistence, her children are gathering up their prized possessions. At the moment, the bounty is piled on the living room floor. Robbie’s rescuing his metal trucks, his music cassettes, his Def Leppard posters. Darla’s saving her Barbies, some books, a pink chain necklace adorned with tiny plastic charms and bells that jingle as she walks. Kate’s salvaging as many of paintings as she can—they’re in several neat stacks, having been stripped from the walls, or ferried from her home studio. One on the top, *Daylight*—depicting thick sun rays struggling to penetrate a lake the color of obsidian—is still wet.

The next six hours move quickly. She gathers a week’s worth of canned goods and bottled water and candles and blankets and clothes and she and the kids bring their belongings to the basement. All the while the spiraling blob moves ominously through the Atlantic toward her tiny family.

When the storm hits, she hunkers in the small room as her children play by the light of battery powered lamps. The winds blow hard. Then, they weaken. The hurricane passes. Rather, it falls apart, turning its blustery fury into nothing more than an extremely windy day.

Branches and leaves have been scattered and the neighbor’s screen house has been injured by a tree, but there is no major damage to the neighborhood. Some kids are laughing and letting themselves be blown down the street. Someone retrieves the neighbor’s cat, which walks

across the lawn quickly, stiltedly, her fur being pushed up in an un-dainty way, so much so that you can see patches of skin.

Upstairs, an interior door slams and then the one to the front of the house. She can't hear it, but she knows a car engine is starting. Darla and Robbie watch her with impatience, waiting to be let outside. She waits too long, eyeing paintings piled against dusty walls, until she lets her children go. After, for a long while, they twirl around faster and faster, letting large gusts of wind send them giggling down the street.

THE STORY OF NOTHING, PART III

Darla pulls up the Internet on a UConn library computer. She's elated, filled with dread. When the search results come back she laughs, ruefully, that his name hasn't been blocked, stopped by some decency filter. Surely he's more dangerous to young minds than illegal gambling, or porn.

Two-thousand three-hundred sixty-five hits. She clicks, randomly. Most pages are lengthy, fawning obituaries. Or, trash pieces about his tendency toward electrocution. Or, both. A few articles debunk his work, calling it the delusions of a self-obsessed lunatic. Most, though, praise his early foresight and intelligence and cutting-edge black hole research, glossing over his later years with a few sentences about his *dark period*. This can't be. He's repositioned in death as a martyr, his final sins absolved because of his horrific end. His last book didn't damage his career at all. The academic world already knows he was a fraud. What's worse: no one cares.

She asks around until she finds a close colleague, a man named Gilbert Hoffman. She wastes no time, shutting the door, extending a hand to the middle-aged man with tiny rabbit teeth hunched behind a desk, saying: "I'm Darla Pierson. Richard's daughter. His book, his last book. It was shit."

He sighs, fumbling with a tea bag, gaze unfocused. "Yes...and no" is Gilbert Hoffman's slow reply, his eyes moving from the desk to her V-necked sweater to somewhere near the center of her forehead. "I was at the funeral. I'm sorry for what happened. Shocking. Just terrible. My condolences."

Gilbert is wearing a ring. *Is your wife the jealous type?* she thinks, automatically, but she says: "What was the reaction?"

“To his death?”

“To his book.”

His face is mournful, yet somehow accepting, as if having known she would materialize someday, ask him this. “Why does this matter, now?”

“Just answer the question.”

Her father was a legend. In the larger scientific community, in their town. She never witnessed any reaction to him whatsoever that didn't amount, in the end, to abject awe. Saxton knew nothing about what his last book was about, or any of his books for that matter, but his accomplishments belonged to them. *He* belonged to *them*. Some admired him. Some lusted after him. Some feared him. Everyone gossiped about him, especially after he was electrocuted for the first time and survived, *thrived*. He was not just a town official, a published author, a big deal scientist with an air of mystery about him, of immortality, of danger. He was a paradox. He rejected authority but he *was* authority. He was handsome and charming and confident and he courted their adoration. Most importantly, he was fixated not earthward, on certainties like layoffs or rising fuel costs like the mill workers or truckers who walked Main Street, but up and away, toward possibilities. His wife and two children, meanwhile, remained small and tethered to the ground.

“He lied,” she says, when Gilbert doesn't answer.

“It wasn't lies, not exactly” he says. “Not according to Richard. No, never with Richard. He believed his own math.”

“That's nuts, clearly. The equations don't add up.”

Gilbert perks up a bit, saying, “He didn’t care. Yes, his own results proved him wrong, which was crushing, but he *believed* what he was saying was true. He was frustrated. The math wasn’t working out, when it held so much promise initially. He’d spent his life on this. This was his biggest passion. In the end, he didn’t care about the equations. The publishers expected a book so he gave them a book.”

“Just answer my question,” she says flatly, sick to death of passions, especially her father’s.

“There was a bit of backlash initially,” he says. “But it died down.”

“Because of his death?”

“No, no. He’d done so much, so much more.” Gilbert smiles, sadly. “A small blip in a brilliant career. He kept working. The quantum mechanical black hole research was proving promising, and he believed it yielded new insights into his theories. I thought he was off his kumquat—contributing to some real, legitimate breakthroughs, yet still refusing to let go. Back then, researchers were more conservative. Richard wasn’t one to stoop to conventional thinking. Maybe his ideas were heavy on the imagination. Yes, obviously. Richard took that bit to the extreme. If he imagined it, it was so. He even sought to redefine God.”

“Richard *was* God. To Richard, anyway.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. I don’t mean “god” in the Christian or Judeo or even the Roman or Greek sense. Not an intelligence that created the universe, more of an intelligence to the universe. God was matter and energy, matter and energy was God. Less randomness, more organization, less fits and starts, more of a purpose. His math didn’t fit the laws of physics as we know them. So he invented new laws.”

“That’s the work of a crazy man. A *dangerous* man.”

Gilbert’s expression darkens. “A bit delusional, yes. Narcissistic, to a fault. But he wasn’t two-fifths to a nuthouse. He was more normal than you think.” He pauses. “He wasn’t a monster, Darla. He was human. As much as you may not think so. He was selfish, acted badly.” He pauses again, longer this time. “But he cared, in his way.”

She stands. “I don’t want to talk about ways he acted, or whether or not he cared. I know all I need to about that.”

“Okay,” Gilbert says, softer now. “From a professional standpoint, he was brilliant. Set aside for a moment his fanciful notions. His insights are unparalleled. Did you even finish the book?”

“I read as far as I needed to,” she says. His face is benign, but something about the set of his brow she does not like.

“You might want to finish it.” His tone is reproachful. Professorly. Fatherly. She is through with Gilbert Hoffman. “I need a lot of things right now,” she says, “but not that.” She lays her palms on the edge of his desk, leans over so the neck of her sweater hangs low. She can tell it takes everything he’s got to keep his gaze fixed to her face. *Who is this person*, she thinks, *this harpy driving a truck over this helpless man, this inert, castrated man, who looks as though he might upchuck his tea?* This is the girl who disappeared after she left home. She is back, in terrible force. She positions her mouth inches from his, until he draws in a breath. “You might want to take a little blue pill and bone your wife, for the first time this decade. Tell her you’re welcome.”

Darla leaves his office and the building, and in the daylight the energy that commanded her tongue continues to surge, unchecked. She's different now, powerful. In control. She goes back to the center of town. A mailman she's never seen before walks up to her. "What do you want?" she says, not kindly. "You're Darla Pierson," he says, unfazed. He stares at her for too long and with too much flush in his cheeks. He smiles. "Quick, what's the square root of 456?" he says. No one ever demanded a performance from her father. He couldn't do math tricks, but they wouldn't have wanted him to. Reducing her to this made her more palatable, easier to swallow.

"Twenty one point three five four."

"You haven't lost the goods," he jokes, lightly.

"Neither have you," she says. "Mailmen make me hot."

"Really?"

"Not really. Fuck off."

Darla turns on her heels and calls Phil's cell, momentarily grateful to him for not reacting to her intellect like a goddamned fool. He doesn't answer. She calls the store and he answers and smacks the phone against something hard and the line goes dead. Later, she shows up at his trailer with a grocery bag, and he is beside himself with anger. He exaggeratedly thrusts his palms in the air with each word of protest, but he opens the door anyway the way she knew he would.

#

One day, when the girl is six and the boy is four, everything changes. Their father marches them from the kitchen to the end of a long hallway. He opens the imposing gray door to

the cellar and descends into dusty light that streams through the only window. Everything to either side of him and below is cast in shadows.

At the doorway the girl stops, and the boy stops behind her.

“Are you two going to stand there gaping all day?” the man says.

The girl steps down. Each creak of all thirty-two stairs echoes inside her head next to her own heartbeat.

The small room reeks of cardboard and stale tobacco and everything about it is old. Discarded calculators, monitors, and printers spill out of boxes in corners. Crinkled papers clutter up a desk, nearly burying a yellowed computer terminal and keyboard. The man’s tattered wool jacket he wears with everything is slung on the back of an office chair.

Old books are all around them, from the floor to the ceiling—rows and rows of answers to thousand-year-old questions. Letters on the spines are gold, green, copper: glittering swirls on dark, somber rectangles. Some of the words the girl has known for years: MATH, PLANETS, TIME. Some she has just picked up: ASTROPHYSICS, GRAVITATIONAL, PARADOX. All these words the girl saves for herself, locked deep inside. At six she goes to first grade, because the woman doesn’t know she keeps these words, and it wouldn’t matter anyway because the woman is determined not to rush her children’s development. She mediates their education, wielding flashcards and Everyday Readers. She says things like, “I read *Hans Christian Andersen*, too, when I was their age,” beaming. Secretly, she is making sure that they merely are bright, not *wunderkinds* like the man. She has her own plans for them, different from his.

#

The slab of red meat is slowly shrinking around the outsides, the oxygen-carrying myoglobin molecules denaturing, becoming gray. Blood is pooled in the bottom of the plastic tray the meat came in, and she has the sudden urge to taste it. She's a cannibal, a vampire, gaining strength from the dead. She dips a finger. It's sweet, metallic, and she gags a little. She turns away, focusing on benign tasks, like roasting potatoes and steaming bundles of asparagus.

When the meal is ready they eat at Phil's resin IKEA dining table ("a gift from my mom") in silence, until the wine kicks in and histories start to flow. He offers his childhood—non-demonstrative parents, overbearing sisters—for her to dissect, qualify. She does neither and gives him less, a single anecdote, a dream about falling. She segues into talk about the university, about Gilbert, and he tips his head forward like she's finally said something interesting. "What were you hoping to accomplish, going there, anyway?" he says. Immediately, she regrets the topic, so she changes the subject, tells a story about her brother eating a jar of mayonnaise because she dared him. "He had a stomachache for three days." "That's nothing." He tells a story in which he taunts his sisters so they take him in the backyard and cut off his hair with garden shears. "I looked like that guy from Flock of Seagulls."

She wonders what she's doing with this man, who is even more of a time-filler than Gregg was. What is it people say? *There is no future here*, whatever that means. He's being flirty and attentive and she should not have come. She needs to leave, now.

Instead, she moves to hard liquor. He lights up a joint.

After a while, he says, "I agree, I think you should finish the book."

"I think you should talk about something else."

“All right, thank you for dinner,” he says. “It was delicious.” He picks up her hand across the table and runs his finger across her palm, along fractured creases. “Your red meat line is huge. Explains why you can eat so much steak. Your colon must be massive.”

She can’t help flirting in return. “There’s a proven link between colon size and happiness. Oh, and you need to work on how you go about charming the ladies.” She needs to stop, but the wine and Jack Daniel’s are dictating where this night is headed.

“It’s creepy the way you stare at your food when you’re cooking,” he says, smiling.

“Food science is interesting,” she says. “Molecular gastronomy.”

“Gesundheit.”

“No, it means *the science of cooking*.”

Since she came across the term, she can’t get it out of her head or figure out why it’s so fascinating to her. Somewhere along the line, she reasons, all the science fairs and cooking lessons from her mother got bastardized in her head. No, that’s not true. If she were to be honest, she’d admit she never took to the lessons. Her mom would set her up on a stool when she was three and hand her a mixing spoon, and she only remembers fixating on the gas flame as it glowed blue, otherworldly, as her mom’s chatty instructions dwindled to silence. Her father’s attention, that was the prize, and science was the gateway. In the sixth grade she made a rocket with compressed air, a roman candle, and a hot dog, and the weenie missile soared through the neighborhood, before zigzagging through the neighbors’ maples and lighting some leaves on fire. Her father grounded her right there in front of a troupe of firemen, more for the benefit of the neighbors, since his face registered more pride than anything. Two hours later he had forgotten his decree.

“Here, I’m going to lay some *science* on you, right now.” She clears off the table and takes three big swigs from the Jack bottle. She wobbles to the kitchen, getting a pickle from a jar in the fridge. “Extension cord?” she says.

“What?” he says, as she unplugs the TV. “What the hell are you doing? If I wasn’t fucked up, I’d find this really disturbing.” He picks up her bottle of Jack and takes a chug.

She takes some kitchen shears and cuts the end off the cord, then strips the wires. She rifles through a drawer until she finds two nails and some electrical tape and tapes the exposed wires to the nails. Finally, sticks the ends of the nails in the pickle and puts the creation in a casserole dish. She plugs in the extension cord and turns out the lights. The pickle glows and flickers in the center like an ethylene torch.

“This is what you do with your genius?” Phil says.

She laughs, and the room tilts on its axis. She’s having more fun than she’s had in a long time. “Haven’t you ever seen Mr. Wizard?” and it comes out “Wizhard.” She motions to him, in the dark. “He did this twenty years ago, with a hot dog. It didn’t glow, but they ate it.”

The acids and salts transfer energy through the pickle, the electrons moving faster and faster, and the pickle is buzzing and shaking. It’s all she can do to not reach her hand out and touch it. It hums like fifty wasps caught in a jar and smoke comes out near the nails. She would die, instantly. She doesn’t want to die, or does she? Not die, just feel the world collapsing away so there’s no more matter, just energy rampaging through her, electrifying her. Wouldn’t that mean death? Not electrify, rather *electrocute*. She imagines burning and sizzling like this pickle, which gives off a stench like a French fry lost in an oven and melted to the heating element.

“You’re insane,” he says, and she can’t see him in the dark but his tone is hurried, excited, swimming on the ends of panic.

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” she says, and she pulls the plug out of the wall and the nails out of the ruined pickle. She sets about adding another pickle, a smaller one, putting the nails closer together this time, angling them, hoping to get a bigger arc of electricity. She turns out the lights, and once again there’s a spark, but this time it jumps above the pickle, arcing between the nails in an orange stream. She pulls out her father’s paperback from her bag and props it against the pickle, so it’s touching the spark.

“What the hell are you doing now?”

“Finishing the book.”

“Holy shit,” he says. “Holy shit. You’re *electrocuting* it. You’ve got some *serious* daddy issues.”

His voice barely registers, because this is amazing, and she feels alive. “Technically I’m not. Paper’s a poor conductor. I’m just burning it.”

“This is fucked up,” he says, and they watch as the pages catch fire.

#

The man sits them bolt-upright on a sticky leather couch, their shorts-clad legs barely reaching the end of the cushion. “Pay attention,” he says. He stands there, staring at both of them in turn. The children look at each other, back at him. The man’s wrinkled dress shirt hangs on him, his thick black-rimmed glasses amplifying his eyes like those of a disguised superhero.

He picks up a piece of chalk. His slate chalkboard is ghosted in white, remnants of equations tested, abandoned. New strings of numbers and symbols infinitely over the heads of

four- and six-year-old children quickly fill the empty space. Even so, synapses fire, pathways start to form in the girl's brain.

When the man is finished, he picks up a thick textbook and sets it on the girl's lap.

"Has your mother taught you anything about science?"

The girl pauses and says, "No."

Their father exhales, slowly, through his nose. "No, I suppose she wouldn't. What about school?"

The girl's throat clenches around her words. This only happens with him. She's on the clock when she opens her mouth, so words come out wrong.

"Just... insides of animals, plants."

The man clamps his jaw and nods. He points at a drawing of a black hole somewhere outside the reach of our galaxy. He talks for a few minutes about spacetime, infinity, an event horizon hovering on the brink of nothing. Beneath his finger, clouds of gasses and stars whirl around the mass of blackness, sparks of light and energy slowly being drawn inside, disappearing. The girl is struck by the fact that she's never seen anything more beautiful.

Suddenly, he stops, looks at the children. To the girl, he says, "What do you think?"

Whatever threshold the man has invented for them, he's inviting them to cross.

"I said, what do you think?" He scans the girl's face, searching.

The girl stares at the floor, silent.

The boy snuffles and wipes his nose, which is angry and red from allergies.

"What about you?" the man says to the boy.

The boy looks at him, confused.

“What do you think?”

“About wha?” the boy says.

The man nods toward the chalkboard then the book, his face as expansive as the universe on the girl’s lap. “Everything. Everything I’ve been saying. What do you think?”

The boy is as still as he’s ever been. “I thin... It’s guh-ood.”

The man’s eyebrows draw together, a motion so slight as to be barely imperceptible. The girl juts her chin up towards him, ready to confirm to him that *she* gets it, what he’s said. Not all of it, not yet. The part, at least, about interrelationships between all things and the importance of realizing the universe in all its massive glory. The part that says that these holes in space that are filled with nothing—that *are* nothing—are important to more than just him.

The man looks down at the book, up at the girl. All the expectation has drained from his face.

He moves on. “I need to get to work,” he says, turning around and walking to his desk.

#

The fire curls the edges of the pages, charring them. The book bubbles and blackens, reducing to ash inside the ceramic dish. It’s a cremation, a funeral pyre.

“This is a bit on the nose, don’t you think?” Phil says.

“Shut up,” Darla says.

Darla feels strangely muted. She was expecting to feel satisfaction, elation. Instead she feels nothing, like she’s burning the *Sunday Times* in the fireplace. Gilbert told her to read the book, and instead she does this, but to hell with him, because what does he know—he talked about her father like he was some sort of hero, even though he’s been outed as a fraud and a liar

and a cheat. A spark lands on the table, and Phil says, “You’re going to burn my goddam place down,” and reaches for the flaming book on the burning, sizzling, stinking vegetable and Darla sees what’s about to happen. “Don’t touch that!” she says, and she is so very drunk and all this is happening at a slower register. She bumps him too hard and they stumble and hit the floor, but so does the burning book inside the casserole dish, and so does the bottle of Jack, which dumps in the flames and causes them to blow out and up into a kind of mini-explosion. Phil has fallen face down on the kitchen floor and is not getting up. Time slows to a stop and when it starts again the whole room glows orange. She pulls on Phil’s shirt-neck and motions him toward the door as the place burns around them.

#

The boy dips his brush in yellow, drawing a stick man, woman, girl. The actual girl is furious, devastated. She knows about space, and time, and spacetime. She listens when the man talks, and he talks about these things often. She remembers everything. She remembers that the speed of light is 299,792,458 meters per second, because the man mentioned this once, 154 days ago, after he hit a homerun at a neighborhood softball game. She remembers the distance from the sun to the moon (150 million kilometers) and the moon to the earth (356,400 kilometers). She remembers her mother saying *I hate you* to her father 37 days ago, at the bedroom door. She wants to cry. Instead, she picks up a jar of black paint and pours it on her brother’s drawing, and *he* starts to cry: not small sobs, but huge, gasping wails that echo in the small room.

Instantly the man stands up, startled. He rushes to the boy’s side, awkwardly tries to embrace him. “Jesus, what’s the matter?” He pats him lightly on the back, as if he might damage him. The boy continues to wail.

“My draw-wing,” the boy says. “My *draw-wing*.”

The man picks up the dark, wet spot.

“What is this?”

“It’s the black hole,” the girl says. The boy has disappeared into it. So have the woman, the man. Nothing is visible, just blackness.

“The black hole,” the man says, slowly, the edges of his mouth curling.

The woman stands at the top of the stairs, back from the gallery to drop off her work. She’s a vision in delicate silk and stylish heels and careful paint on her big, porcelain-doll eyes, which she’s reapplied after crouching panicked next to a toilet for the last half hour for no reason she can fathom. She picks up the boy, as the man and the girl disappear into space.

#

The trailer burns. It crackles, hisses, almost alive, brilliant in its death throes. The flames radiate from behind the aluminum—which curls, but doesn’t burn—through the drooping windows, the eyes of a jack-o-lantern a week after Halloween. Oranges and reds and yellows spike upwards. They have the potential to devastate the neighborhood and the woods, but they are burning themselves straight up instead of out, churning the oxygen into carbon and beginning to thin. Black smoke bolts for the sky, heading toward the stars, and Phil is staring up, following its progress without saying a word.

She touches his shoulder and he’s snapped back to life. “Don’t touch me,” he says, backing away like she’s hit him.

“Phil,” she says, and he looks at her with disgust, like she’s some sort of specter, the walking dead, her body having burned up in the flames.

“I used to think you were *everything*.”

Sirens close in and she is sorry, she is sober now and sorry, and she doesn't know how to communicate this to Phil so she says the same thing again and he isn't seeing her at all anymore, instead is staring at some point over her shoulder. Her breath is too big for her chest, which aches from smoke.

A memory: At her father's viewing, after the service is done and guests have scattered, she and her mother watch from a distance as his lover stands staring into his face like he will somehow leap from the coffin by force of will alone, hers or his. Her mother was medicated and numb long before now and her eyes are steady—she seems almost serene as she watches the two. *He* is serene. His face is still, giving no indication of the violence of his end. This violence had come to him twice, the second one much more intense, leaving char marks down the length of him. To Darla, this man has long since meant nothing, and his end is nothing, justified even, and though she doesn't believe in God, to her his death might as well be Old Testament, an act of nature steeped in retribution, a literal strike from the heavens. Call it punishment for sins or for just not staying dead the first time. The first death didn't take, when Darla was eight. He had lit up and dropped backward on the sand as the rain slammed against his face, chest, legs. She could do nothing but watch and wait until paramedics gave her back her breath. Now, she takes in her mute mother and the weeping lover and her father himself, in death finally mortal. The funeral home appears in sharp relief, colors saturated, walls too yellow, curtains too blue. She's felt hints before, but this is new. For the first time, she experiences annihilation. A crushing of her torso, short-circuiting of her legs and arms. The heavens that struck her father obliterate her, collapsing

her airway. She kneels down, gasping. The girl, no more than twenty, his teaching assistant but now exposed as much more, looks up and through her from somewhere far away.

LAST DAY

June 24, 1997 is my father's last day. That morning he wakes up, energized, his grad assistant Teena strewn out naked beside him, in the bed my mother bought. He looks down at her clear, smooth skin and places his palm in the curve of her hip and no doubt marvels at the beauty and simplicity of youth. When my mother calls him from Cleveland, watching my grandmother spit up blood, she swears she hears Teena's familiar giggle, faint as a whisper.

My father and Teena eat eggs and toast at my dining room table. Teena, in his robe, pores over his notes, trying desperately to find something there, some spark of truth that will give them the breakthrough they need and make him love her, back. He reads the notes, too, with guarded, mischievous blue eyes that give her flutters and the other grad students hope. His dress shirt is creased and crinkled up the back and she offers to iron, but he says he doesn't see the need. Later, two dishes are left in the sink, with two cups, two forks, and a dirty frying pan.

At noon, he drops off Teena at her apartment and drives to campus, where he has a faculty meeting that produces memos and committees but no real decisions. The department head and an associate professor get into a debate about curriculum. They ask my father about which science classes should be cut, in light of the budget situation. He is furious that they would dare cut any of the science classes and he's pissed that he spends too much of his days caught up in bureaucracy at the school. He enjoys the feeling of power, but he's interested in decisions only at the very basest level, the level where neurons connect and synapses fire at the moment of cognition, enlightenment.

In the walk to his car in the oppressive heat of the afternoon sun, my father sweats, the aluminum salts of his antiperspirant mixing with urea, lactate, sodium, potassium, calcium, and

magnesium, forming dark stains under his arms that my mother can't get out with bleach, though she tries, over and over again, scrubbing, scrubbing after he is already gone. The dark rumblings off in the distance do not serve to warn him, do not make him think about fate, destiny, or karma. My father doesn't believe in *new-age bullshit* notions.

Five-hundred thirty-nine and a half miles away, in a hospice, I watch as my grandmother's eyes sink deeper into her skull and I am convinced that each veiled, raspy breath will be her last. The room expands and contracts. The noise of her disease fills the space, the acoustics of lung cancer. Two months ago she was walking around, raking her leaves, shopping. Now, tubes and wires feed her every which way, and my mother is nauseated and filled with despair until she pops two Xanax and is once again fine. I leave, walk behind the ratty brick building. Blades of grass rise up against a gnarled oak tree, a patch of life in a wasting-away parking lot with so much dirt on the painted white lines that they all but disappear. I take a long drag off my joint, enjoy the rush, the instant amnesia. My grandmother manages to hang on for one more year. Six-million, eight hundred ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred twenty more breaths. My father has maybe five-thousand left.

When he gets to his 1976 Datsun he turns on the air, the cool blast drying the acrid sweat from his brow, making him shiver. He calls me on his car phone. "Darla," he says. "Does your grandmother's house have a radio?"

I am so, so high and at this point in my life want no part of my father's shit even though I am hopelessly steeped in it, at a basic, biological level. This week I received two more scholarships, to Smith and Harvard. "Your daughter is lucky," the Harvard Dean of Admissions said to my father. He said this because I hadn't shown up for my interview. "Damn lucky," my

father said to me later, “that your last name is Pierson.” He looked down at his lap, up at me. “You’re stubborn. Luckily, you’re also brilliant.” He smiled, shook his head, pushed the black rims of his bifocals up his nose, making his irises seem giant, wrong. “You’re just like me,” he said.

I turned down both scholarships, because I’m not. I can’t be.

When I get the call later that night about my father’s death, I will go to my mother, meet her chemical stare. The news touches the tips of her consciousness, bleeds through just enough. She’s got no grief left. She doesn’t want to let it, but relief sloughs off her like so much dead skin.

She’ll fly home for the funeral, but she is too fucked up to deal with this today, so I fly home alone. I won’t know what to do so I’ll drive to my Assistant Vice Principal’s house. He won’t know what to do, so I’ll give him one last blowjob while his wife’s off at pottery class making little ceramic teacups for the girls. “Are you okay?” he’ll say, afterward. I’ll wipe him off my face and cry a little, about my father. Not because I don’t want to believe that he’s gone, but because I don’t want to believe that he was right about me.

“Darla?” my father says. The gnarled oak swims in my vision. “How is she doing, by the way?”

“Same,” I say. “No, no radio.” I make sure my voice is vague, unaffected.

He pauses. “Women her age half the time don’t own televisions, but I’ve never heard of a self-respecting granny without a Crosley on the mantle.” He keeps his tone light, tries to make me smile.

I take another hit. Exhale, so he can hear. “No. No radio.”

“My segment’s on NPR tonight. I just found out. Eight-thirty.”

He is set to talk about his black hole research. They are at the cusp of a breakthrough about quantum mechanical black holes, black holes at the level of atoms, so small as to pass through everything, even me, then bursting in tiny micro-explosions. “I’m elaborating on Hawking. Yeah, he was right and all, but he didn’t have the whole story. I want you to listen, Darla. You of all people will understand.”

I don’t want to understand, as colors explode in front of my eyes, little black holes floating all over me, passing through me. “I don’t think so,” I say. From the other side of my haze I hate that he knows things Hawking doesn’t, but he doesn’t know what the inside of my mother’s mother’s house looks like.

The A/C rattles into the phone, his speaker. “You’ll tell your brother?”

“Robert’s not here. He stayed home, at a friend’s.”

He pauses again, longer this time.

Robert will stay over at his friend’s for two months after our father’s death. Our mother will try to call, but he won’t ever come to the phone, will say he’s busy or doing homework. One night, he will discover religion. He will pick up his friend’s dad’s Bible, will read through the Old Testament for the first time. He will read well into the night. He will learn that good people don’t fuck everything that moves and that God is a vengeful god and punishes the nonbelievers, the wicked. He will feel vindicated, smile to himself, stop trying to make sense of it all. He will build a wall a thousand miles high, as high as the heavens, as denial itself.

My father's voice gets husky, thick. "Of course. I understand." He stopped trying with Robert years ago. Now, I believe he's done trying with me, too. "Give my love to your mother, then. Your grandmother."

At twelve-thirty he has lunch in the cafeteria, flirts with the plain-faced attendant, tells her the green of her blouse highlights her eyes. She blushes, flattered because no man has spoken to her like this in years, since before her husband trotted off with the slut-waitress. She hopes to see him again tomorrow, hopes she has a chance. He finds the spaghetti and meatballs and promptly forgets about her, and there're no more tomorrows for him, anyway.

At two the local weatherman warns about severe thunderstorms that have moved into the county. Two towns away a screen door has blown off its hinges, was found down the street at an elementary school, impaled on a flagpole. The weatherman says to be careful. No one pays attention to severe thunderstorm warnings, because in Saxton, nothing bad ever happens—not really, not permanently.

At two-thirty my father drives to the gas station, gets the Datsun detailed until it is shiny and smells like cardboard trees. Then he goes home, throws the receipt for the car on the counter and his stained dress shirt in the hamper. He works unblinking at the computer in his basement office because that's what he does each day, typing, staring, until he can no longer focus, strings of numbers soaring inside his head.

As the sun sets, he changes into a suit and tie. His body in the mirror is looking older. He has grays, a few more lines around the eyes. Though he is fit, wiry, sustained mostly on coffee and chewing gum and sex with my mother once a week, Teena each and every day. He is at his

peak, feels nothing can touch him. His mind is sharper than ever, his intellect honed lecturing in classrooms, debating with colleagues in labs at work, grueling away in his dark basement office.

At six o'clock Teena is at the door, bright eyed, hopeful. He kisses her on the mouth and she melts into him, breathing in his musk. They go to dinner at *Chez Frederique* and dine on three courses of watercress salad and duck and syrup-drizzled cheesecake. The candlelight makes his eyes appear intense, his intentions more serious than they are. His voice in her ears is like poetry, music.

He is thrilled, feels younger than he has in years, in no small amount due to this latest conquest, who is younger than usual, with shiny, wheat-colored hair and an alluring gap-toothed smile. She wants to marry him, has for a while. He doesn't know this, believes their relationship to be casual. He is actually quite fond of her, is looking forward to going back with her to the house that he and my mother and my brother and me share and listening to his segment on the radio. As he looks at her, he feels a sensation of something almost like contentment.

Tiny microbursting black holes float all around them, float deftly though Teena's skin, into her brain. Out of the blue, without any clear warning or reason, she starts in. Why today is unlike any other day, where she decides to get the courage—be it from the wine or my father's eyes or from nowhere at all—is unclear, even to her. For some reason, she chooses today to broach the subject of their relationship.

We've been doing this for six months, and You can't love her, and How could you do this if you loved her? she says. *She's at her sick mother's bedside, for Christ sakes.*

He is beside himself. She is crying, and he hates to see her cry. Outwardly, he agrees with her, says Yes, you're right. Inwardly, he agrees with her, too, but he still doesn't see her point.

He is a man who deals in binaries, *force or inertia, true or false*. Love is a gray area, incomprehensible.

Overhead, clouds are turning dark. Positive and negative charges separate, because of ice or an updraft of air or maybe because they just can't bear to be together anymore. The rains begin. Hard and fast, the storm hovers, hits them with full gusto, sending hairspray streaming down her pale cheeks, drenching her pretty party dress. On the ride back to the house, their mood is like the weather.

My grandmother's eyes flutter open and she speaks, a litany of remembrances. She smiles, thinly. I touch the gauzy skin of her hand. The dosage she gets is keeping her pain to the level of annoyance, like mosquitoes stinging the inside of her chest.

Teena and I once had a conversation in our hallway about shoes. It was the closest thing to an actual conversation we had. Before his death, I mean.

The pumps were shiny and black with ruffles and rhinestones and made her toes stick out like pudgy little sausage links. She was standing in our hallway waiting for my father and her eyes looked so adrift, so like those of a marooned tourist, that I was moved to actually speak to her, for once, beyond just *Hi* and *Bye* and *What time will you and Dad be done with your mathematical proofs down there, because Robert has this thing at school*. I am better at mathematical proofs than she is—my dad knew this about me and so did she—which is why she always high-tailed away when she saw me coming. That, and she saw that I saw the way she looked at him.

“Those are cute,” I said. I wasn't sure why I thought this, because I didn't typically think that way. My own shoes were ratty, comfortable.

She gaped at me, snapped back from somewhere. “Hmm?”

“Your shoes. They’re cute.”

She thought I was shitting on her, which I wasn’t. Finally she said, slowly, “Thanks.”

After that, neither of us had a thing to say. So she excused herself, went to the bathroom, cute shoes clicking on the floor.

I am alone in the living room of my grandmother’s dusty three-bedroom colonial with high ceilings and arched windows, the place vacant now, soon to be sold to a construction manager with a pregnant wife and black Labs. The lamps are old and blanket the walls with dead yellow light. It’s so quiet I can hear their hum. Pictures of my grandmother with my late grandfather and my mother with my brother and me are everywhere, but my father’s pictures are gone. My grandmother took them down the first time my mother fled to her and cried. He’s with Teena now, I know. I wonder when he’ll tire of her, move on to the next toy. He never did stick with the same woman, or deodorant, or cologne, or even chili recipe for long. My mother was the one constant. He hurt her more than he guessed, and he guessed he hurt her some. He was too good at parsing out extraneous variables in the larger experiment.

In the rain my father and Teena argue on the side of Interstate 75. The strong electric field hovers, the potential energy enough to power a billion ham radios. The oppositely charged air attracts, sparks quick and hot. Bolts discharge overhead, thunder claps reverberate through the car, rattle his skull. “Why, now?” he says. He means her ultimatum, on the night of his debut.

They yell, eventually, as the conversation escalates. She tells him to go to hell. He tells her he’s already there. He is furious, gets out of the car. The keys are in the ignition and she could drive away, but she is never able to put that much distance between them. He begins

walking. He doesn't mean to leave her there, not really. He is making a point, standing out there, getting drenched beneath the harried sky, a mess of electric sparks overhead.

Now, he's walking, walking, walking to the top of a hill on the side of the highway, an embankment built up from discarded construction dirt. He hadn't really intended on going that far, but he is too far to turn back now, and he doesn't want her to win.

The rain is deafening in his ears and the air is alive, palpable. The thunder doesn't scare him. He's beat this demon once before, nine years ago. For a while, he needed rehab therapy for some numbness in his hands and feet, but that was it. The doctors couldn't believe he came through so unscathed. The town was awed, but he considers this normal: his family legacy. His grandfather was killed by a downed power line at forty, after languishing around for two whole minutes, before finally fading away. He was weak, my father thinks, without the proper will to triumph, cast the demons aside.

My father raises his head to the sky, water pouring into his mouth. He feels free, irrational: thinks he'll keep walking forever, leave the banalities and trivialities of emotion behind, continue on toward the coast, maybe conduct his research undistracted at Caltech. They have a fantastic lab there and dole out plenty of money to theoretical physicists. The weather is balmy year round, with none of this seasonal, oppressive heat. He's walking, walking, but Teena is watching him from the car, and suddenly he hesitates, maybe feeling a tug of something tangible, real, maybe also thinking for a split second of me, of his son, of his wife five hundred miles away. At this precise moment, for the first time in his life, maybe he cannot calculate and quantify his emotions; maybe he's tentative, unsure. Also at this precise moment, a negatively charged leader of air feels its way toward the positively charged earth, and no obstacle—not even

my father—will stop it. Rather, my father’s hesitation changes its course, eggs it on. The sky rises up around the cold silhouette of the man in the rain. The terawatt of energy reaches down, casting a spark that starts at the heavens and ends at the man’s scalp and shoots him up completely, magnificently, like a roman candle strapped to the ground. Time stretches, collapses. Molecules fuse. The man has the powers of the universe, then—real power, power which he was born to—and he is a legend, a God. His body rises up and at once lets go, stiff, free. He doesn’t hear Teena’s scream because his brain is short-circuited, blank.

When the paramedics pronounce him dead, I am sitting alone in the dark on my grandmother’s dusty couch. I am yellow in the forgotten light of the dirty bulbs and I feel ancient, like an old book, a tomb. Nothing matters to me now. I have evolved beyond family, beyond fathers. I am untouched, untouchable. I can listen, and it won’t mean anything. I can hone in on my father’s expert voice, clear and deep. I can let it diffuse through me. I can feel something, can even care for a split second about microscopic things that breach the power of heaven and earth, these tiny prehistoric remnants of the early universe that evaporate before you even know they exist.

Sometime later, I will sit at a coffee shop with Teena. She will be older, with facial lines and yellow cigarette stains marring the gap-toothed smile. She will still be beautiful. She will have moved on, will be married with kids and a husband who dotes on her, listens to her needs, desires. She won’t want to return there, to reconstruct the dark cell of the past. I will press her like I’ve pressed everyone, wait while she fidgets with her vintage lace blouse, because I am no longer invincible.

STEAK LAMBRUSCO

1. Clean two chicken breasts and butterfly them. Stuff them with bleu cheese and parsley.
Don't sauté them. Throw them immediately in the trash. This is not your recipe, it's hers.
Your family has eaten this too many times.
2. Try something new. Season two six-ounce steak filets with cracked black pepper and sea salt. Don't over salt. Too much salt can ruin a dish. But don't be afraid of salt, either. Salt enhances the natural flavor.
3. Add a pat of butter to a hot cast iron skillet and add the filets. The steak must not be overcooked. That seems obvious. You'd be surprised at how many perfectly good steaks go bad because the protein strands shrink and toughen too much. At that point, the delicate texture is lost. Watch the subtle transformation of the tender flesh like it's a death, a transubstantiation, a rebirth. Watch until you can't bear to look anymore. When you smell smoke, pull the charred husks from the burner and throw them away. Start over.
4. Cook the new steaks to medium, then remove them from the pan. Add butter, a sweet Lambrusco, beef broth, minced shallots, Dijon mustard, red pepper flakes, minced garlic, and parsley and simmer until slightly thickened. Pour over the meat. Serve with a simple vinegar-based potato salad and greens.
5. Wrap the steaks and salads and get in the car. Don't second guess your decision. Just do it. Don't think about the failings, or the years, or the divide. Grow up and start the car.
Drive.

6. Go past her house. It's a duplex, smaller than the single-family house you all lived in when you were a kid, which itself was small. Circle the block for ten minutes, enjoying the neatly trimmed shrubs and white-painted mailboxes. Tell yourself you give a shit about landscaping.
7. Fixate on the past. You are nine. As your mother smokes Pall Malls and paints landscapes in her study and your father runs calculations in the basement, sprint around in the backyard, the grass cool and morning-damp, soaking your socks. Run to the basement door and look through the paneled window. He's not alone. She is blond, young. She's wearing high-top sneakers and nothing else and you get a look at a bare, grown-woman body, the first one you have seen, complete with mysterious curves and shadows. Your father is fully dressed and he kneels in front of her. She grips his hair as if rooting dead stems from the garden.
8. Run away, the memory buzzing in your head like a mosquito. Focus on this moment. It is everything. Actually, it is nothing at all, a chute made of breath. Encounter your brother who is climbing through wild, thorny bushes to retrieve a ball, the whole back of his legs covered in thin spidery threads of blood.
9. Enter the kitchen. Your mother is at the kitchen table and her hands are ruined with dried blue paint. Tell her what you've seen. She doesn't react. After a minute she tells you to *Get out of here and go play.*
10. Lift up your shirt for Allen Farquhar and Tim Walls and Richard McCoy and Douglas McOwen and your skirt for John Williamson and Samuel Aldrich and Davie Woomble and Bobby McIntyre and Walton McBride and get tired of just standing there. Give a

series of hand jobs to Donald Rice behind the fire station for a week straight after school, long enough to get good at it. Please him until he begs for you. Focus on his face for years and years until the memory defines your existence. But, don't dwell on it. Donald and the memory of Donald and what Donald represents are extremely important but at the same time, completely and utterly insignificant.

11. Your mother cooks fried chicken. Eat at the kitchen table with your father and brother and mother and your mother's fingers still flecked in blue. Later, she is at the kitchen sink, furiously scrubbing under her nails. Don't think about this, even though this could be something to finally pay attention to. The hydrangeas at the duplex are overgrown. Most people wouldn't think they are that bad, but they're reaching into the garden, and if they're left any longer they could choke the living shit out of the smaller plants.

LOGIC

The woman answers the door. She is well preserved, striking, Liz Taylor with less makeup. Her eyes are alert, focused. She smiles, but only her mouth muscles move. Maybe she's just nervous. No, her breathing is even. She is smaller than you remember: thinner, more athletic. She motions you inside. You gesture with your serving dish and Tupperware container and she moves to take them but you hedge. "Better get potholders," you say. She clicks her tongue at your Teflon palms like you're showing off. Maybe you are.

"I hear you cook a lot, now," she says as she places a towel around your dinner and sets it on the stove. Her voice is devoid of high notes, and she looks out the window as she speaks. Any pride or kinship she may feel about your cooking is deeply buried, or long since impossible.

"Who said that?"

"Your brother," she says.

"He encourages me. For your sake, I think. What I'm really doing is writing a cookbook."

This last part's a lie. It's not a cookbook, as you've deleted nearly all of the recipes. You're not sure what it is. If anything it's a chronicle of your death. You've ended, finally: the borrowed version, and the pretend version. Your rebirth is lackluster. You're stuck—you have a clean slate, but you're writing on it with past, not future. People who know you or who used to know you try to give you advice. They tell you you're wasting your brilliance, should aspire to more, but you know the who and the how and the what they want you to aspire to. You tell them to piss off.

“He mentioned the cookbook,” the woman says. She’s still peering out the window.

You need to do something with your legs so you walk to the couch, which is large in a small living room. You sit. Your heart beats too fast: 112 beats in 35 seconds. Your breaths are shallow, twice too many. You will this not to happen. Not here. Every day you fight the urge to stay home.

Today, your urge-fighting has brought you here, of all places. There is a stuffed flamingo on the floor, which you recognize from the old house. It’s misshapen and thin and the height of a small cat. You touch it, and your hand recoils slightly. It used to be in the living room, in the corner, next to the television. “No one expects a flamingo by the TV,” the woman used to say, as a means of justifying her purchase to a man who couldn’t care less. Other remnants from the old house are here, too. Odd, familiar paintings fill the walls. Cows are grazing in the middle of an ocean, whales are swimming in a desert, a landscape with a single, barren birch tree, roots dangling, is floating in the middle of a dark sky. Some paintings, though, you’ve never seen before. These are portraits, which she never used to paint. Large eyes as if from those Seventies Blythe dolls are everywhere, accusing, pleading. Her paintings never sold well, despite the fact that they’re good.

“Are these all yours?” you say, about the art. “You’ve been busy.”

The woman watches the park across the street. Busy mothers and busy fathers with their busy children whoosh by on bikes, skates, scooters, skateboards. Two boys play under a large maple, throwing themselves into a pile of cut grass. The woman takes stock. There have been losses, but things are good now. She has friends. She cooks, she gardens, she knits. She plays charades in her den and a few of the widowers flirt with her but she pays no mind. Her life is too

full for the likes of men, and frankly she's had it with them, their manipulations and their arrogance. Her son is virtuous, successful. Grandchildren fit comfortably into her days, coming here every other Saturday and when their parents are out. Everything is perfect. There is no more room. "*You've* been busy, since you've moved back home," the woman says, flipping the sentence, twisting it into something dark. She picks at her elbow, no longer composed.

The woman's thoughts close the distance at break-neck speed. The two of you will never have a relationship, you know now. It's simple logic: This woman is done with the past. To her, you are the past incarnate. This woman is done with you.

"Just busy starting my new life," you say. Your new life has involved a bartender, a graduate teaching assistant, a cop. First flushes: You stopped to get drinks, you took a college chemistry class, you were speeding down I-91. Last straws: You sobered up, you realized you know more than he does about kinetics and thermodynamics and every other word with an *ics* at the end, you refused to stop speeding down I-91. "How's your life *new*?" the woman says. She's been saving this up for a while, and she's not wasting time. *New men to fuck? New men to trample?*

"How's *your* life *new*? You've been saving up, as well. *New ways to be a shut-in? New ways to shut down?*

"You could stand to be home alone once and a while."

"I'm alone when I want to be. I don't need men, I want them."

"You're just like him."

"People tend to think so."

"You don't?"

You don't answer.

A man you once knew is living with a girl who works at his store. One day you saw them—you stopped for milk at the grocer's and his car was right there across the street and he touched the girl's face before getting out to pump her gas. It was a slight touch, easy enough to miss. A man you once married is living with his ex-wife. It's her on their answering machine, just like that. You flew back to finalize the divorce, and the three of you sat in your old living room on a brand new chintz sofa, looked over paperwork, sipped tea. Your ex-dog is gone, you don't know where. The man didn't offer to explain his absence, nor did he offer to explain the documents, the complex jargon, *one* because the ex-wife wouldn't have approved, and *two* because the man now knows some truths about you. The ex-wife knows some truths, too; they are half-truths and oversimplified truths and exaggerated truths, but no matter. She was busy watching you, too busy to see that the man was watching you, too. You felt his eyes, too intent, and you knew she shouldn't look up but you did anyway. A battle of wills. You won, as you always do, because he looked down, instantly, clumsily. Maybe you are just getting older, and maybe you're just not the warrior you once were, because the memory itself becomes an opponent. It is persistent. It starts small, tries to intrude when you are idle, the colors of it taking shape when you are making coffee or watching TV. You try avoiding, abstracting, but his face, wracked with undiminished emotion, hovers before you, until you shrink inside. The memory invites others, a small army commandeering your thoughts when you're waking or drifting to sleep.

"I'm not sure who I am," you finally say.

"You're a bit old for that."

“It’s honest, at least.”

You get up to leave, because owning your life is new and far from comfortable. What is second nature is the pain in your arm. It’s not a heart attack but it’s a death, each and every time. You sit back down, breathing heavy, wondering if you should just give in to it. You consider who you are, at this moment. At once you are everyone you have been and you will be. You are seventeen and you are seven and you are thirty-two and you are fifty, the years piling on like sediment on a river bed until water gives way to dust. You are no one. The template has snapped and you’re someone new. Or, you’re spanning the ages, following a different template, one that’s always been there.

The woman stands quiet in the kitchen, faltering in her resolve. She doesn’t speak but she edges nearer because you share this, or the possibility of this, rankling in your bones, deeper set than marrow. She’s closing in and you inhale and exhale and inhale, inhale, inhale until the room is unnatural, a fever dream, and even the air in your lungs has stopped, and maybe if you inhale one more time you can kick-start existence.