THE BLOODY NOSE

AND OTHER STORIES

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THE BLOODY NOSE
AND OTHER STORIES

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Thesis

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PART I

HELEN
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HELEN

The Bloody Nose

Helen took the first pitch. She hated doing that, but it was a ball anyway.

“1-0 count,” the home plate umpire said.

She stepped out of the batter’s box to take a practice swing. It was a lazy swing, but it had been a long six innings and she was tired. They were finally in the top of the seventh. Bonnie was in scoring position, on second because of an infield error and they didn’t have any outs yet. Her team was behind by two.

She glanced down at Gerry, the third base coach to look for a sign. There wasn’t one, which meant hit the ball the hell out of there. Helen took her stance and the pitcher called time. Sighing, Helen stepped out of the batter’s box again. The sun was going down and the sky had clouded over but the air was still as thick and humid as it had been at noon. Helen’s hair stuck to her neck and her black uniform pants were hot against her legs. The first inning felt like days ago.

Gerry, a stout man with a mustache, met her halfway between home plate and third base. Helen was 11 years old and almost as tall as Gerry.

“You got this one, kiddo?” His mustache bobbed up and down when he talked.

“Yeah.” Helen took off her helmet and handed it to Gerry. He held it while she adjusted her ponytail.
“Looks like rain.” Gerry smoothed down the edges of the number on the back of the helmet before he gave it back to Helen.

Helen spit, then spread the dirt around with her cleats and pushed her helmet firmly onto her head. She bent down to tighten her shoelaces and stared at the circle of wet dirt by her feet, thinking how she wouldn’t care if the game was rained out. She stood up, wiped off her bat handle, patted her gloved hand on her thigh, then licked the fingertips on her other hand and spit again. She wiped her fingertips across a clean spot on her shoulder. Gerry watched her and smiled. His mustache stayed a straight line. At the beginning of the season, his mustache had been a dark brown, but the summer sun had lightened it to the color of an autumn leaf.

“You’re a real pro, kid.”

Gerry toed a clump of green crabgrass on the field until it was uprooted. Helen bent over and picked it up, rolling it between her fingers like clay. She tossed the clump of grass behind third base and smoothed the dirt where the grass had been.

“Shut up, Gerry.” Helen held her bat underneath her arm like a folded newspaper.

A red and orange hot air balloon passed above them, floating slowly over centerfield. Helen tilted her helmet back on her head to look at the people in the basket and wondered if the softball game looked like spots of red and blue on a brown field. Helen wanted to see the game from far above in a striped balloon that could float around slow as it pleased. It would look like they were having fun.

“Them your folks over there?” Gerry pointed to a man wearing a tan windbreaker and navy blue ball cap. He stood next to a woman in a flowered sundress and peach lipstick. The woman looked uncomfortable.
Helen looked over and waved, glad for the small shadow her helmet cast over her face. They were late, the game was almost over. “Yeah, that’s them.”

“You look a lot like your old man,” Gerry said, still studying her father, whose hair stuck out the sides of his ball cap like a scarecrow’s.

“I know,” Helen said.

Helen’s dad said she must take after his father, who played semipro ball for a farm team for three years. He had been called up to the majors and would have made it, Helen’s dad always told her, but a shoulder injury ruined his pitching arm. Helen’s dad couldn’t play at all, but Helen wasn’t sure he had ever tried.

The catcher walked back to home plate, put on her mask, and nodded at the umpire.

“Looks like your dad done spit you out ’stead of your mother.” Gerry walked back to third base and folded his arms across his chest.

Helen smiled over her shoulder at Gerry before taking her stance. Ever since she started playing when she was six, she had crowded the plate. It bothered most pitchers, so she never corrected her stance. Her parents worried she would get hit one day, and her mom said sometimes she had to turn her head because she was afraid. Helen liked the high and outside pitches, thought pitchers lofted them over the plate like they were trying to throw hot apple pies without making a mess.

Helen was one of the best hitters on the team, third in the lineup. Helen’s dad said the third batter had to be a well-rounded player, someone the team could always count on. Helen’s mom said she didn’t know why she couldn’t bat fourth. Gerry said Helen messed things up for Melinda, their cleanup batter.
The second pitch was low, barely in the strike zone, but Helen swung anyway, sending it into foul territory. It hit an aluminum fencepost, making a dull sound like distant and muffled thunder. Helen didn’t look at her parents, her mother would be frowning.

“1-1 count,” the umpire said.

The umpire probably would have counted it as a ball if Helen wouldn’t have been so impatient to swing.

“This ain’t golf, Hel,” Gerry said.

The next pitch was lower than the first. It hit the ground before the catcher could get it and Bonnie stole third, making it with plenty of time.

Helen tapped her cleats with her bat and saw her parents on the sidelines, talking to Bonnie’s mom and her new boyfriend. The next pitch was so high and outside that Helen couldn’t have reached it with a broom.

“Let me hit it,” she muttered, holding her bat over home plate before bringing it to her right shoulder.

The catcher lifted her mask. “She’s afraid of you.”

The next one was perfect, seemed to get fatter as it came over the plate, and Helen swung hard, almost losing her balance. It went into foul territory again, toward her parents. Her dad tried to catch it, but the ball bounced off his fingertips and hit her mom in the nose. Her mom’s nose started to bleed, smearing the peach lipstick into a frown.

“Full count,” the umpire said, and handed the catcher a new ball. Helen’s dad put the bloody one in his windbreaker.
Before stepping into the batter’s box, Helen yelled over to her parents. “Sorry, guys.” She shrugged her shoulders.

Helen’s dad smiled weakly and her mom tilted her head back, a tissue pressed against her nose. Bonnie’s mom helped her to sit in a small spot of shade underneath an oak tree.

The umpire brushed home plate off, and Helen coughed as the sticky air filled with dust. The infield was quiet except for the swish of the umpire’s broom and the propane burning from the hot air balloon. Helen watched the balloon and frowned because she thought the freshly swept home plate would still show streaks of dirt if she were up that high.

Helen dug her right toe into the dirt and tapped home plate with her bat, leaving a small circle of dirt on the clean plate. Part of her wanted to wipe it off again. She looked at the pitcher and could tell she was tired. She might walk her, throw a wild pitch because her arm was working like a noodle by this time. The pitcher pounded the ball into her mit, and puffs of dust stuck in the air and drifted in front of her face. She waved them away and brought the ball to her chest. Helen realized she didn’t even know the girl’s name. For a moment, she felt sad for the pitcher and wasn’t sure why. When the pitcher released the ball, Bonnie started from third and Helen swung at it like to make it break, sending the ball into centerfield. She watched it slice through the humid air as she made for first base. She went straight to second without slowing down or even looking to see where the ball was. When she got to second, the centerfielder was throwing it into third, but Helen went anyway, and slid headfirst, knocking the third baseman’s leg with her helmet. She dropped the ball and Helen was safe.
Helen stood up and smiled. She brushed off her shirt, wiped her mouth on the dirty sleeve of her uniform and spit, but the taste of dirt stuck to her lips.

“Nice hit, Hel,” Gerry said. He smiled and looked toward the outfield. “Thought you was aiming for that hot air balloon.”

Helen nodded. “Think I was.”

Melinda was up to bat and Gerry gave her the sign to take the first pitch.

“She’s not gonna take it,” Helen said, her back to Gerry. She stood with her knees bent, ready to run. “She never takes the first pitch.” Helen dangled her arms and let her fingertips brush against the dirt.

Gerry shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe she’ll give your Mom a black eye to go with that bloody nose.”

“It was an accident,” Helen said.

The pitcher glanced at Helen, then back at Melinda, and threw the ball low, barely in the strike zone. Melinda swung, digging in low to reach it. It was a foul ball, a hard grounder down the third base side. Gerry jumped and didn’t even try to catch it. Helen watched the ball go all the way to the leftfield fence without slowing down.

“0-1 count,” the umpire said.

“Maybe she’ll give you a black eye,” Helen said and relaxed her legs.

Melinda was a switch-hitter, batting left-handed for this at bat. She was big for an eleven year old, would have been big for a sixteen year old. There was a rumor on the team that she ate raw eggs to keep her strength, but no one could prove it.
“Time out, Blue,” Gerry said to the infield umpire. The third baseman went to the pitcher’s mound and Gerry, Helen, and Melinda stood on the foul line between home and third.

Melinda towered over them, but sulked like a child. “What’s the time out for?”

“To throw her off,” Gerry said, nodding toward the pitcher’s mound.

“She wants to walk me,” Melinda said.

On the sidelines, Helen’s dad was resting his arms on the fence next to the player’s bench, and her mom sat alone in the grass. She looked careless and out of place as she took a bloody tissue out of her nose and added it to a pile beside her. Helen sighed and wiped the sweat from her forehead. She bent down and picked a blade of grass, and when she put it in her mouth, the taste reminded her of the mint iced tea her mom used to make.

Gerry pulled at his mustache with stubby fingers. “She won’t walk you with the tying run on third. She wants an out.”

“She’s not gonna get an out, and she won’t give me a strike with the tying run on third either.” Melinda held her bat between her crossed arms and the aluminum hit her chin when she spoke.

Helen took off her batting glove. She had forgotten to take it off and her hand was sweating. “I’m going to steal home.” She blew on her hand and wiped the sweat on her shirt. The blade of grass stuck to her lip and she spit it out.

Gerry took off his hat. “You want to?”

“Yeah, I can do it. If she keep throwing wild ones, it’ll be easy.”
Melinda nodded and her helmet bobbed up and down. “I’m gonna swing anyway.”

Gerry rapped Melinda’s helmet with his knuckles. “Knock it all the way to kingdom come.” He nodded at the umpire and walked back to third base.

Melinda went back to the batter’s box and tapped her bat against the plate. Helen stood at third and tried to look calm as she put her batting glove in her back pocket. She knew it wouldn’t be easy; hardly anyone stole home when a left-handed batter was up. No one was expecting it, so she was counting on that to make it easier.

The ball was high and outside, too far for even Melinda to reach. Helen started from third the moment the ball rolled from the pitcher’s fingertips. The catcher had to leap to the side, and was able to slow the ball with her glove, but it got past her. The pitcher had seen Helen coming and was already rushing for home plate. Helen hit the dirt hard and slid across home, standing up just as the catcher tossed the ball to the pitcher. She was already safe.

Gerry clapped from third, and Helen hit Melinda’s hand before walking off the field. She took off her helmet and sat on the bench.

“Way to go, honey,” her dad said and sat down next to her.

“Thanks, Dad.” Helen was short of breath and took a long drink of water. She wiped her mouth with her sleeve. “Is Mom okay?”

“She’ll be fine. A little blood never hurt anyone.” He patted her forehead, and when he drew his hand away, a piece of her hair stuck to a hangnail on his thumb. “I stubbed my finger trying to catch that foul ball.”
“Sorry,” Helen said, and looked away. Her mother was sitting under a tree, and with her back resting against uneven tree bark and her head tilted back, Helen couldn’t tell if she was asleep or awake. She waved, but hoped she was asleep. Her mom raised her head and waved back.

“Good job, Helen,” she said, pinching her nose still. Helen could hardly hear her, so she turned back to the field to watch Melinda.

The pitcher had almost given up, but was trying not to, or at least not to let it show. On the mound, she looked like a paper doll, the team behind her like scraps of paper, too tired to field the balls hit off her weakened pitches. She wound up, her arm moving mostly by momentum, and sent a changeup over the plate. Melinda swung too soon and missed. The pitcher hadn’t meant to throw a changeup and was as surprised as Melinda, who hardly ever missed a ball. The next pitch was level with Melinda’s knees, and she swung hard enough to hit two balls at the same time. Helen’s team rose from the bench and cheered as the ball went clear over the fence.

They were in the lead, and four runs later, the other team forfeited. Their relief pitcher was injured and the starting pitcher was throwing the softball like it was as heavy as a cannonball.

Helen sat on the bench, and when her father went to talk to Gerry, she rolled up her pant leg, wincing when she saw the scrape. She poured water into her cupped palm and pressed it to her knee, watching the water make clean lines on her dirty skin.

“Here, let me,” her mom said. Her voice was soft, like the receding daylight had wrapped around it. She dabbed at Helen’s knee with a napkin, holding it by the corner so she wouldn’t get any blood or dirt on her hands. Her nose had stopped bleeding but Helen
could see dried blood above her mouth. A spot of blood on her dress had turned a dark brown.

The sun was going down over right field; if it had been a hit ball, it would have been a base hit. Helen shivered and looked at her mother’s head, ignoring an urge to wipe the blood from her face.

“Does it hurt?”

“No.” Helen watched as her mom washed the dirt from her knee with an alcohol swab. The small pink scrapes were bright against her clean skin and she clenched her jaw when the air cooled the fresh cuts.

“All done.” Her mom smiled and covered Helen’s knee with Band-aids.

Helen pushed her pant leg down. “Thanks, Mom.”

The sun was sinking below the horizon, and Helen thought it looked like a fat peach. She thought she would like to play a night game sometime, stand in the cool night air when she should be asleep, pretend she was a shadow brought to life.

“Did you see the hot air balloon earlier?” Her mom’s voice cracked, like it wasn’t used to speaking.

Helen nodded, and saw that her mom was staring at the ground. “Yeah,” she said. Her voice cracked the way her mother’s had.

“Do you want to get ice cream with the rest of your team?”

“I don’t feel like it.”

Helen thought maybe it was something about the night that made it easier for her mom to talk. They hardly ever had conversations, but Helen wasn’t sure they had anything to say. Helen knew she should at least apologize for the foul ball that hit her in
the nose. It would be easier in the dark, with only the outlines of their features visible, but she decided not to say anything.

“Here comes your Father, we’ll see what he thinks.”

“Mom, I said I didn’t feel like it.”

Helen’s dad approached with Gerry, and Helen’s mom smiled at a point behind Helen’s shoulder. Helen knew her mother was pretending to smile at her, so she smiled back, her eyes focused on the chain link fence behind the backstop.

“Mrs. Hamilton, I was just telling Richard what a damn fine ballplayer you got here,” Gerry said.

“Thanks,” Helen’s mom said.

Helen’s mom shook Gerry’s hand. She was taller than Gerry and stooped her shoulders to make up for it. Helen thought it made her look older than she was. She put her hand on Helen’s shoulder, it was damp and Helen could feel it through her shirt.

“Sometimes we wonder if Helen wasn’t supposed to be a boy.”

Helen looked away, wished she was on the hot air balloon, miles away by now.

Gerry laughed politely. “Hope your nose doesn’t hurt.”

“No. Thank you.” She took her hand off Helen’s shoulder.

“You guys going out for ice cream?”

Helen shook her head at Gerry.

“Sure, Gerry,” Helen’s dad said.

“Dad, I’m tired. I don’t want to.” Helen bent the bill of her hat and put it on backwards.

Helen’s dad shrugged his shoulders. “Guess not. Maybe next time.”
Gerry shook his hand. “See you next week.”

“Good game, Helen,” he said as he walked away.

They walked toward the parking lot together and no one said anything. Their shadows stretched across the grass like stalks of corn and Helen remembered a story her grandmother used to tell about a girl whose shadow would change color and shape. Sometimes, it was the color of butterfly wings, or a field of rye, or even butterscotch pudding. Whenever the girl was happy, her shadow would dance, all on its own. Her shadow would sulk or break into pieces when she was sad, and it wouldn’t be whole again until she had shed one hundred tears. Helen was glad it was only a story—she knew how their shadows would look.

They reached the concrete and the sound of their feet against pavement surprised Helen. She walked slowly in her cleats and dragged her bat behind her. It hurt her ears but she didn’t want to stop.

“Sorry we were late,” Helen’s dad said. “Your Mother had a meeting.”

“It’s okay,” Helen said, and handed her bat and helmet to her dad when they got to the car.

He unlocked the trunk and handed Helen the blood-stained softball. “Put this in your mit. I don’t want it rolling around in the trunk.”

Helen tossed the ball in the air, but missed it in the dark. She held her breath and tried not to look at her mom’s face as the softball rolled toward her feet. Her mom looked down at the ball, smudged with her blood, and picked it up with two fingers. She didn’t look at anyone as she dropped the ball in Helen’s outstretched glove.
Her dad hung his arm out the window and whistled softly through his teeth while he drove. Helen stretched out in the backseat, using her glove as a pillow. She held the softball on her stomach and wanted to throw it out the window. Leaning forward, she spit on her shirt and wiped off the softball, but the blood had already stained it, so she dropped it on the floor. She put her hat over her face and lay down again.

“Mom?”

Helen’s mom was leaning against the window, her hands pressed against her thighs.

“I think she’s asleep,” Helen’s dad said. “Did you need something?”

“I just had a question.”

Helen’s mom shifted in the front seat. “I’m not asleep.”

“Oh.” Helen breathed heavily into her hat. Her face was warm, and she could taste sweat on her upper lip. When she moved her hat, the air was cool against her face.

“What were you going to ask?”

They were pulling into the driveway. “Nevermind.”

Helen’s dad stopped at the side door. “You two can get out here. I’ll put the car away and take care of the dog.”

Helen took her bat and helmet from the trunk and walked next to her mom. She looked down at her mom’s leather sandals, then at her own dirty, untied shoes. She felt clumsy.

“Do you remember that mint iced tea you used to make?”

Helen’s mom was searching for her keys in her purse, but she paused and looked at Helen. “Sure. Why?”
“Could you maybe make it again this summer?”

“The mint plant didn’t do so well last summer so I got rid of it.”

When she pulled her keys out of her purse, one of her tissues was stuck to the keychain. She shoved it back in her purse.

“Oh.” Helen held the screen door open for her mom.

“I could make it with mint extract, if you want.”

“No, that’s okay,” Helen said, and walked into the dark kitchen behind her mom. She dropped her stuff on the floor and turned on a lamp. Helen’s dad walked into the kitchen with the dog, the screen door banging behind them.

“Dog smells like cat shit,” Helen’s dad said.

Helen moved away from the dog and watched him lick her mom’s leg. Her dad laughed quietly and snapped his fingers at the dog. The dog sniffed Helen’s helmet and glove, pushed the softball across the linoleum. Helen’s mom picked it up, stood next to the sink, and opened the window. She moved the white-lace curtains aside with her free hand. Helen’s dad held the dog by its collar.

She swung her arm back in an awkward movement and Helen could see beads of sweat on her mom’s temples. Helen’s dad let go of the dog and grabbed her arm. She didn’t struggle, but he had to peel her fingers from the ball. He took the ball, and Helen’s mom let her hand drop to her side. She narrowed her eyes and looked at him, then reached her hand out. Helen’s dad shook his head and gave the ball to Helen. He stood next to his wife and closed the kitchen window. Helen could see his hands shaking. Her mom closed the curtains and let her hands linger on the lace. Her dress brushed against Helen’s leg as she walked past her.
Still holding the softball, Helen went to the bathroom. She heard her dad open the screen door, and she dropped the ball in the trashcan before she went upstairs. She took off her shoes in the dark, lay down in her dirty uniform, and tried to go to sleep.
Butterscotch

It was a Thursday morning and Helen wished her hands belonged to someone else. She sat next to her mother in the waiting room and buried her nose into the glossy pages of a magazine. She pulled her face away and watched her dirty fingernails turn the pages. The backs of her legs stuck to the green vinyl chair and Helen had half a mind to sit on the floor but worried it would wake her mother.

Maurine Hamilton slept in the chair with her mouth open, head slumped to the side, legs carefully crossed as if she were at a business meeting. It was as if all of her belonged to someone else, and Helen wondered if she ever relaxed. Her breaths came in slow tufts that smelled of butterscotch candy and mint toothpaste. Helen watched the rise and fall of her mother’s chest until her own breathing matched the slow rhythm. She stopped and held her breath for as long as she could.

Across from her was an older man in a work shirt and faded blue jeans, his left hand wrapped in a bag of ice. “Lincoln” was stitched in red cursive letters above his left breast pocket. With his right hand, he turned the pages of a hunting magazine and Helen wanted to tell him to smell the pages. The man looked up and caught her glance. His face was tan and square with a splash of freckles on his nose. He smiled, then looked at his hand.

“Got some sort of infection,” he said.

Helen looked at her mother, still sleeping as if it were the middle of the night. She nodded at Lincoln and peeled her legs from the chair, then sat with her hands underneath her thighs. The chair was sticky against her palms, and she rubbed her thumb against a torn piece of vinyl. She moved her hands again and gripped the wooden arms.
“Is that what the ice is for?” Helen asked softly.

The man moved the bag to show Helen his hand. It was fat and swollen like an udder.

“I thought it would keep the swelling down.” His voice was quiet and it sounded like an apology.

Helen leaned forward and looked at his hand. “I don’t think it worked.” She squinted at his nametag. “Lincoln.”

He smiled weakly as though Helen had just told him a bad joke. “No, I can’t say that it did,” he said.

Helen wasn’t sure what to do next, so she pointed at herself and said, “Helen.”

Lincoln smiled. “Nice to meet you, Helen.”

The hunting magazine lay across Lincoln’s lap, and Helen held her finger between the pages of her own magazine.

“Are you reading that?” Helen asked, pointing at his magazine.

Lincoln stared at it like he wasn’t sure how it got there. “No, I was mostly looking at the pictures. I’m more of a fisherman than a hunter.”

Helen looked at the ceiling, the same way she did in history class when she wanted to say the right thing. “Aren’t they the same?”

“No.” Lincoln grabbed a piece of newspaper from the table and wrapped it around the wet bag on his hand. “Not to me they’re not.”

Helen thought they were, but didn’t want to argue. Her mother had just told her that morning how she couldn’t always be right.
“You should smell the magazine. It’s one of my favorite smells,” Helen said. She looked at the carpeted floor.

“That so,” he said, and brought the magazine to his face. “My favorite smell is a fresh-cut lawn. Least favorite is wet leaves.”

Helen smelled the *National Geographic*, smiling behind the pages. “What’s wrong with wet leaves?”

Lincoln tapped the hunting magazine against his leg. “They smell like a wet dog.”

Helen scrunched up her nose and put her magazine on the table. “My other favorite smell is blueberries. Butterscotch is my least favorite.”

Lincoln cocked his head to the side. “Never noticed the smell of blueberries before, unless they was in a pie.”

She looked at her mother, then back at Lincoln. “My mom used to make blueberry pie, but she burnt most of them.”

Lincoln took his green baseball hat from the seat next to him and scratched his chin with it. “What’s so bad about butterscotch?”

Leaning forward, her elbows on her knees as if she was telling a secret, Helen opened her mouth, then changed her mind. Her shoulders drooped and she looked at the floor. “I don’t know, just don’t like it.” She stacked the magazines on the table, then fanned them out so she could see all the covers.

Lincoln put his hat down and looked at the newspaper wrapped around his hand. It was dripping onto the carpet, and he crumpled it into a soggy ball and threw it at a trashcan. He frowned when it fell short, then put his weight on his left hand to help himself up.
Helen got out of her chair first, and Lincoln sunk back with a thud as though someone had pushed him.

“That’s going to stain your skin,” Helen said.

She walked over to the newspaper on the floor; it would have made a perfect spitball, and she wanted to throw it at the wall, but she backed up, aimed, and shot it in the trashcan. She smiled before sitting down.

“What’s going to stain my skin?” Lincoln asked.

“The ink from that paper.”

Lincoln wiped his hand on his jeans and frowned at the finger-streaks of newsprint it left.

Helen took a napkin from her mother’s purse and gave it to Lincoln. The purse was heavy, and she set it down slowly. She could see inside it, the soft pink lining was torn and had faded to a muddy brown.

“What did you do to it anyway?” Helen asked.

“My hand?”

Helen nodded, wiped her bangs off her forehead.

Lincoln wet the napkin on his tongue and rubbed it across his jeans.

“Not sure. Maybe a bug bite or something.”

He smeared the newsprint with the napkin, leaving shreds of tissue stuck in the denim.

“Maybe you’re allergic to bees,” Helen said.

He shook his head. “I don’t remember getting stung by any bee, though.”

“Oh.”
Helen took the used napkin and gave him another.

“My mom was stung by a bee last week. She didn’t see it land on her coffee cup, and when she took a sip, the bee stung her on the mouth.”

Her mother was breathing softly out of her mouth, a gentle wheeze sounded in her throat, like a fan on low speed. A lock of hair hung in front of her face, swayed gently back and forth like the sticky fly paper on Helen’s porch.

“You can still see where it stung her,” Helen said, and pointed at her mother’s upper lip. “She almost choked.”

Lincoln leaned forward and looked. “It must have hurt,” he said.

“She cried when it happened.” Helen looked out the window into the parking lot.

“I saw the bee land but didn’t say anything. I thought she would see it.”

Lincoln shrugged his shoulders. “Shit happens,” he said.

Helen laughed and gave him another napkin.

“Maybe you had an allergic reaction to peanuts.”

He shook his head. “I didn’t eat any peanuts.”

Lincoln looked at the napkin and handed it back to Helen. “Here, I think someone already used this.”

The imprint of a mouth was on the napkin, and the thick, dark coral outline of her mother’s lips embarrassed Helen. It looked like a sloppy kiss. The lipstick rubbed off onto Helen’s hand when she put the napkin back in her mother’s purse. She rubbed her fingers together and they felt waxy.

“Sorry,” Helen said, frowning as she handed Lincoln another napkin. She sat next to him and sighed heavily.
“Nothing to be sorry about,” Lincoln said.

Outside, three starlings stood by the ditch at the edge of the parking lot. Their feathers were iridescent and greasy. Lincoln looked at the birds and shook his head.

“I used to know a woman,” he said. “She wore dark red lipstick every day, said it made her lips look plump. She was always getting it on everything.”

“Oh,” Helen said. “Were they?”

Lincoln shook his head. “No, just red. Looked more like a couple of cherry tomatoes.”

Helen watched the starlings fly away, one after another. She kept her gaze fixed on the birds until she felt her eyes cross.

“What happened to the woman?”

Lincoln rubbed his hand across the stubble on his face, and the sound made Helen think of her father.

“She left,” he said. “I don’t know her anymore.”

Helen nodded, looked at her mother sleeping. “Was she your wife?”

“Yes,” Lincoln said. It sounded like a question.

“Why did she go away?” Helen asked. “Was it because of the lipstick?”

“She was expecting,” Lincoln said, biting his lip. “Guess it kind of did have something to do with the lipstick.”

Helen tugged at her earlobe, pinched it hard with her fingernails until she could hardly feel it.

“I don’t know what that means,” Helen said, and let go of her ear. It was hot, and she pinched it again. “What was she expecting?”
Lincoln exhaled, laughing a little. “Sorry, it means she got pregnant.”

She wished she hadn’t asked about the woman, she didn’t want to know what happened anymore.

“Only it wasn’t mine, it was a bartender’s at Huntington Country Club.” He blushed and looked out the window.

Helen looked at the dirt underneath her fingernails and at her mother’s coral lipstick smeared on her skin. She rubbed her fingers against her leg until there was a red spot on her knee.

“Sorry, you’re probably too young to hear about those things,” Lincoln said, and looked at her.

Helen shrugged. “Shit happens.”

Lincoln smiled and nodded his head slowly. The smile stayed on his face like something he had taped to his chin.

“Do you need another napkin?” Helen asked.

Lincoln stared at his hand, stained black like a dusty Bible. “No thanks, I can get the doc to clean it.”

They were silent, both of them looked at the walls, watched the second hand on the clock. Helen looked at her mother, still sleeping. She knew she would have to wake her when the nurse called her name. Maybe she would just let her sleep.

Lincoln cleared his throat and tapped the bill of his hat against his swollen hand. Helen watched, wondered if she could play softball with her hand like that. If anything, she could be a pinch runner.

The receptionist opened the door and looked at Helen. She pointed at her.
“What are you here for, hon?”

Helen shook her head. “Nothing. I’m here with my mom.” Helen coughed. “She’s sleeping.”

The receptionist smiled, and Helen could see a piece of green food stuck in her teeth. She stood in the doorway, her hip holding the door open. She looked at Lincoln.

“What about you?”

Lincoln held up his swollen hand.

“I see,” the receptionist said.

“He doesn’t know what’s wrong with it,” Helen told her.

The receptionist raised her eyebrows. “Doctor Reynolds is on a conference call, it’s running a few minutes over. He’ll be done soon, I’m sure.”

The receptionist had a mouth like a horse. Helen stared at the woman’s teeth. They were big, almost too big for her mouth. She shut the door and went back to her office.

The door woke Maurine, and she opened her eyes like someone who had been caught talking in their sleep. She looked at her wrist, but she wasn’t wearing a watch.

“How long have I been asleep?” Maurine asked, rubbing her eyes.

Helen looked at the clock by the receptionist’s door. “Since ten o’clock.”

Maurine focused her eyes on the clock. “It’s 10:45 now. Why didn’t you wake me?”

Helen picked up the National Geographic. “I was reading.”

Maurine looked at Lincoln, then back at Helen. She pushed her purse behind her feet. “Who are you?”
Lincoln shifted in his seat. “Lincoln.”

“It’s right on his shirt, Mom.”

Maurine sat up straight and uncrossed her legs. “I left my glasses in the car, Helen. I can’t see very well.”

Helen sighed and pointed in her mom’s purse at the wire frame of her glasses.

“Oh,” Maurine said.

She put them on, then combed her hair with her fingers. Helen could hear her long fingernails catching against her hair.

Maurine looked at the clock again. “I’m going to have to reschedule. We don’t have time for this.” She stood up with her purse and looked at Helen.

“Mom, I want to finish reading this,” Helen said.

Maurine grabbed Helen’s arm. “Take it with you.”

“It’s not mine.”

“Helen, I don’t care. Leave it, then. We have to go.”

Helen stood up and tucked the magazine under her arm. It felt smooth against her skin. She shrugged her shoulders at Lincoln.

“Bye, Lincoln. I hope your hand gets better.”

“Thanks. It was nice talking to you, Helen.”

On the way out the door, Helen grabbed a leaf off the fake plant. The leaf felt like satin when she flicked it across her cheek. She followed her mother outside, dropping the leaf in the parking lot. It was hot, and Helen wanted to be back inside the air conditioning. She opened her magazine to finish reading the article. It was about an
African tribe, and there was a picture of men and women dressed in bright colors. Helen thought they looked strong. The caption said they were at a funeral.

In the car, her mother swore and slammed the door hard. She took a cigarette from the pack in her purse, holding it between her teeth as she lit it. Helen put the magazine on her lap and sighed.

“Mom, I read this story about an African tribe when we were in there.”

Maurine braked for a red light, and the car jerked to a stop. “That damn doctor, keeping me waiting for almost an hour.”

Helen waved her hand in front of the air conditioning vent. It was still blowing out hot air. “Well, this story. These people say that when someone in their tribe dies, there are two things that can happen.”

Maurine nodded, but kept her eyes on the traffic light. She reached into her purse for her sunglasses, and the lipstick- blotted napkin stuck to her hand. Maurine rolled the window down and dropped it into the street. Helen watched the napkin flutter away, and it looked like a mouth screaming.

The light turned green and Helen waited for the car to move. “Some of the dead people go to a city, but they only go there if they’re remembered by someone who is alive still.”

Maurine parked the car at the IGA. She pressed her lips together and rubbed her temples.

Helen rolled her window down and waved her arm through the humid air. “Aren’t you going to ask what happens to everyone else?”
Her mom paused before getting out of the car. She clenched her keys in her hand and held her purse against her stomach.

“The other people are forgotten about. They don’t go anywhere,” Helen said.

“Why can’t they just believe in heaven or hell?” Maurine dropped her keys in her purse and got out of the car.

Helen shrugged. “Maybe they don’t forget about anyone.”

Maurine raised her eyebrows and pointed at the grocery store. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Helen put her feet on the dashboard and fanned herself with the *National Geographic*.

“Did you hear me, Helen?”

Helen put the magazine in the backseat. “Yeah, you’ll be back in a minute.”

Maurine peered in the car. “Put your feet down.”

“Okay,” Helen said, and she watched as her mom walked away, tossing her cigarette behind her.

On the other side of the street, the wind picked up a plastic bag and carried it down the sidewalk. The bag stuck to a wooden mailbox post and hung like a ghost. Helen thought about death and the African tribe. When she died, she wanted to be remembered like the people in the city.

Inside the grocery store, her mom stood at the cash register, her eyes focused on the young clerk’s mouth. Helen couldn’t remember the color of her mom’s eyes. The clerk said something, and Helen watched her mom laugh as if it were the first time anyone had said anything funny.
Helen wondered if she would ever reschedule her doctor’s appointment. Laughing louder than she ever had before, Helen faced the street and dangled her arm out the window. She laughed with her head thrown back and her mouth wide open, the same as her mom.
Helen pulled out a handful of dirt and threw it down the slight hill toward the garden. Her dad was standing between rows of lettuce, resting against his shovel. He waved, then pointed at his radio. “Indians are winning, 2-1.”

“Oh,” Helen said, not knowing what else to say. She turned toward the road and yawned without covering her mouth.

A tractor drove slowly past the house, clinging to the curve of the road, pebbles shooting out from under its back wheels. The rumble of its engine was loud, and Helen wanted to yell with it, wanted to feel her words get lost in the noise and dust. Her lungs about to explode, she opened her mouth and took a deep breath. She wanted to scream something she had never said, something no one had ever said, but she didn’t think it was possible to say anything new. She closed her mouth and bit the insides of her cheeks. The tractor was past the house, and she watched it drive up the hill, dull gray smoke from its exhaust trailing behind.

Helen ran her fingers through the matted grass by her knee and pretended she was working tangles out of her hair. Her mom usually combed her hair; Helen never had the patience to get the tangles out and would let it hang in clumps around her shoulders. Almost every day, she sat in front of the mirror in her parents’ bedroom, staring at ashtrays and perfume bottles while her mom carefully worked the tangles out of Helen’s hair. Helen never cared that it hurt when her mom combed her hair.

She put her book down and lay back in the grass, her arms folded underneath her head. The late afternoon sun bothered her eyes, made her think of the seventy-year-old blind woman in the next town. The woman had stared at a solar eclipse two years ago
without protecting her eyes; she had wanted to see if she could stare until she went blind. She did, and everyone laughed but said they felt sorry for her. The woman didn’t care what they did; she said it was the brightest thing she had ever seen, and she was glad it was the last thing she ever saw.

Last year, when Helen was in fifth grade, the woman came to her science class and told them it had been like dying, but without having to stay dead. People don’t remember the last thing they see, the woman had explained, because it’s usually followed by their last breath, and she didn’t think there was anything the matter with choosing the last thing she would ever see.

Helen’s dad told her the woman was careless, but Helen thought she was lucky. Helen’s mom had said there wasn’t much difference between a careless person and a brave person, and she didn’t know why the woman couldn’t be both.

Helen remembered watching her mom read the paper the morning after the solar eclipse. In the picture on the front page, the woman was sitting on her patio next to a vase of lilacs. Her smile was wide and unstrained, and her eyes crinkled at the corners as if she were laughing at something that wasn’t there. The article said the woman had been a first-chair cellist for an orchestra in Germany for twenty-five years. The woman admitted she was lucky that she didn’t need eyes to play music. Not everyone could love something they couldn’t see, the woman said. Helen had pretended not to notice when her mom touched the picture of the woman and pulled her hand away as if it were on fire.

Three weeks ago, the doctor had found a small lump in her mom’s left breast and said it was a good thing they had discovered it so soon. Helen closed her eyes against the sun and wondered what her mom looked like now, asleep in a hospital bed in Cleveland.
Helen knew that her mom usually slept on her side, one arm under her head, the other curled against her chest, and she knew that she couldn’t stop herself from grinding her teeth during the night. One morning about a month ago, Helen had stood by the door pretending to fumble with the lock while she listened to her parents in the kitchen, and she heard her mom say that her mouth was sore every morning because she couldn’t fall asleep without clenching her jaw.

Helen put her hand over her heart, kneaded the skin with her knuckles, and felt only bone. She made a fist and pushed it hard against her chest.

Lying on her side, Helen put her cheek against the grass and watched her dad in the garden. His old portable radio sat on the lawn, and Helen could faintly hear the announcer’s voice coming from the speakers. She stared until her dad was a blur of colors, and when she closed her eyes it was as if his image had been painted in soft watercolors against her eyelids.

With her arms pressed against her sides, Helen rolled down the short hill to the garden. She stretched her hands out and dug her palms into the grass, stopping just short of knocking over the radio. Her dad grinned and pushed his hair off his forehead. Looking at him, Helen wondered how she would remember him if she suddenly went blind. She liked him like this: his cheeks sunburned and spotted with freckles, his straw-colored hair streaked with dirt and sweat; but she knew that, after a while, the features of everyone she knew would blur into a single image and everyone would have the same face.

Helen lay on her stomach and propped herself up on her elbows. She was silent as the Indians took the field in the bottom of the fourth. The first batter struck out, but the
next two walked. The Twins were at the top of their lineup, and with only one out and two men on base, Helen hoped the Indians could hold them. The Twins shortstop hit a hard line drive down the middle, and the second baseman caught it on the bounce, tagged second, and threw to first for a double play. The game went to commercials and Helen cupped her chin in her palms.

Her dad kneeled next to a tomato plant and pushed the metal pegs deeper into the ground. Resting his weight on his hand, he leaned into one of the plants and pushed his nose against a light red tomato.

“The Tribe has this one in the bag, Helen. I can feel it.”

Helen picked up small rocks in the dirt and shook them in her hand like dice. She dropped the stones and drew circles around them. The circles looked like breasts, and Helen sifted a pinch of dirt through her fingers until she had ground it to a fine powder. Her eyes started to water and she blinked, trying to get the dust particles out without rubbing her eyes.

“When’s Mom coming home?” Helen asked.

Her dad was eye-level with her, and he wiped his thumb across Helen’s cheek. She ducked and pushed his hand away.

“Hey,” he whispered. “You’re crying.”

Helen shook her head and looked at her dad. “There’s dirt in my eyes.”

“I know.” He stood up and stretched. “I know,” he said again.

Helen pushed the dirt, shoving her palm into the uneven earth as if the ground beneath her could give away if she pushed hard enough. When she lifted her hand, the imprint of her palm was in the garden, and she pretended the wavy creases and lines
would grow into a towering plant with hands and fingers for branches. She gathered saliva in her mouth and let it fall to the dirt.

Her dad stepped over her, and Helen watched his heavy boot land on the impression of her palm. She bit her lip as he rubbed her hair.

“I’m picking her up tomorrow morning at ten.”

“Is she going to be all right?” Helen asked.

She smoothed over the dirt where the large sole of her dad’s boot covered the imprint of her hand, and pressed her palm to the ground again, her fingers stretched far apart like she was playing an octave on the piano. She lifted her hand and spit again.

Helen’s dad picked up a stone the size of a baseball and threw it in the woods at the edge of the property line. Helen tried to follow the path of the rock to see how far he had thrown it, but she could only hear the rock hitting tree branches.

“She’s going to be fine.” He picked up another rock and tossed it from hand to hand. “It was a small lump, not even as big as this rock,” he said, showing it to Helen. “Here, catch.”

Helen caught the rock, barely the size of a cherry tomato. She stood up and threw it back. “But won’t there be a hole?”

“A hole?” He pushed the rock into his palm.

Helen blushed. “In her chest.”

He shook his head and threw the rock to her. “No, babe. Just a small scar.”

“Okay,” Helen said. She closed one eye and held the rock to her face. “What will they do with the lump after they take it out?”
“Well, they’ll test it to make sure there’s no cancer.” He put his hands into his back pockets and leaned back on his heels.

Helen threw the rock into the woods. “Okay,” she said, and sat down. She swirled her finger where she had spit, gathered a clump of wet dirt on her pinkie, and drew two thick lines underneath her eyes.

Her dad laughed. “Good thing your mom can’t see you now.”

Helen wiped more dirt on her forehead, rubbed it into her cheeks like rouge. “She’d tell me that proper young ladies don’t play with dirt.”

“Then she’d scrub at your face with sandpaper until you were clean,” he said, smearing wet dirt on his forearms.

Helen laughed and piled dirt on her feet until she couldn’t see them. Her dad added a handful of dirt, molding it on her toes like clay. He tipped the watering can over her feet, then added more dirt.

“A volcano,” Helen said, standing up. She pulled a clump of grass, added a handful of dirt, and set it on his head like a hat.

“A mud pie,” he said, and shook his head.

Helen sat down next to him and wiped her dirty feet in the grass. The daylight was fading, and she could feel the air cooling as she watched the sun sink behind the hills across the street.

Her dad leaned over to turn up the radio. “Indians are still winning.”

“Did they score again?” Helen asked. She could feel the mud drying on her face like a thin layer of paper-mache.

“No. The announcer just said the bases were loaded when Coco fouled out.”
Helen frowned. “Why didn’t they use a pinch hitter?”

“They thought Coco was on a hot streak.”

Helen picked at clumps of wet dirt sticking to her dad’s arm hair. “We’re a mess.”

“Your mom would scream if she saw us now,” he said, pulling grass from his hair and from behind his ears.

Helen wiped her face on her T-shirt and shielded her eyes from the sunset. “Do you remember that blind woman from a few years ago?”

He shook his head.

“You remember, she stared at the solar eclipse and she talked to my science class last year.”

“Oh, her. I remember that old bat.”

Helen rolled her eyes. Her dad stood up and put the radio under his arm, picked up the shovel, and walked to the garage.

“What about her?” he asked over his shoulder.

Helen picked up the watering can and her paperback book and followed him.

“Never mind.”

“What made you think of her?”

Helen put the watering can on a shelf next to an old coffee tin of nails. She sat her book on top of the coffee tin. “Nothing, only she would think we were clean now.”

“Least someone would,” he said, laughing.

Outside the garage, her dad sprayed his arms with the hose and held his head underneath the water. Helen jumped in the puddles, felt cold mud squishing between her toes, and held her hands out to be sprayed. She cupped the cool water in her hands and
threw it on her face, rubbing at the dried mud on her cheeks. Her dad hung up the hose and dried his arms and face on the front of his T-shirt.

“I’m going to the grocery store. Do you want to come?”

Helen’s face felt dusty and she could see dirt between her toes. She shook her head. “I think I’m going to take a shower.”

Her dad looked in his wallet. “What do you want for dinner?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

He got in the car and rolled down the windows. “There isn’t anything you want?”

“Not really.”

Helen walked toward the side door. She could feel heat coming from the car, could see beads of sweat on her dad’s temples and she wanted to tell him that it must be awfully hard for a person to go blind.

He backed the car out of the garage and stopped by the side lawn, talking to Helen through the passenger side window. “What about pasta?”

“Okay,” Helen said. “With chicken and mushrooms.”

“Dessert?”

Helen paused by the screen door. “We’ll get ice cream,” she said.

He nodded and put on his seatbelt. “All right. I’ll be back in a half hour. Set the table after you shower.”

Helen waved and went inside, letting the screen door slam behind her.

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The bathroom was thick with steam when Helen stepped out of the shower. She wrapped herself in one of her mom’s large beach towels and opened the door to let the steam escape. Leaning out the doorway, Helen peered down the hallway to make sure no one was home. She wiped the fog from the mirror above the sink, watching herself as she whispered, “Good thing your mom can’t see you now.”

She looked down the hallway again, then back to the mirror. Pointing at her reflection, she cleared her throat and, speaking in a deeper voice, said, “Good thing your mom can’t see you now.”

Helen shook her towel loose and leaned closer to the mirror. Her nose was pink with sunburn, and she rubbed at a spot of dirt that hadn’t come off in the shower. She scrunched her nose, but the dirt was still there. Frowning, she took her mom’s aloe lotion from the shelf and squirted some on her middle finger, shivering as she rubbed the cool green lotion across her nose. She scrubbed at the spot of dirt until she realized it was only a freckle, and she wondered if it had always been there.

The mirror had fogged over again, and Helen wiped her hand across it, hoping she wouldn’t leave fingerprints. With her hand over her heart, she stood sideways in the mirror and poked her chest hard with her thumbnail, leaving a crisscross indent like two half-moons.

Helen looked at herself in the mirror, laughing as if someone had just told her something very funny. She laughed the way her mom did, with her mouth open wide, her head thrown back so her hair tickled her skin. Helen covered her mouth with her hands and kept laughing, because sometimes her dad told her that she only laughed with her
eyes. Helen had always wondered what it looked like, but when she asked, her dad said it looked like fireflies dancing in her eyes. Helen thought she looked the same as always.

She put her hand to her cheek like someone had just said something to shock her, but Helen thought she looked bored or tired. She folded her arms across her chest and pretended she was supposed to be sad. She took her mom’s white bathrobe off the door and put it over her shoulders. The cotton felt rough against her skin, and she shrugged the robe off, kicking it underneath the towel rack. It was hard pretending to be sad, and Helen felt stupid. She blinked her eyes, rubbed them with her fists, and tried to make herself cry.

Standing a few steps back from the mirror, she ran her hands through her hair and tried to recognize her reflection. She looked like a compilation of features, a stack of body parts and facial expressions stolen from people she had never met.

Suddenly cold and embarrassed of her nakedness, Helen held the crumpled towel around her body and walked down the hallway to her parents’ bedroom. She opened the door slowly, inhaling the comfortable smell of her mom’s shampoo and cigarettes mixed with her dad’s aftershave.

The vanity table was cluttered with bottles of perfume, tubes of makeup, and loose change. Helen sat at the table and held a pair of earrings to her ears. They looked gaudy, and she raised her eyebrows at her reflection. She undid the clasp on a sapphire necklace and hung it around her neck. The sapphire tickled against her throat, and she swallowed, watching the stone flicker in the mirror.

A breeze came in through the open window, and Helen shivered as the curtain brushed against her naked shoulder. She ran into her own bedroom and put on a pair of
old jeans and a gray T-shirt. She put on her wristwatch and saw that her dad wouldn’t be home for another ten minutes. Helen tossed the wet towel on her bed and went back to her parents’ bedroom.

She sat in front of the mirror combing her hair, parting it down the side the way her mom always did before she went to work.

“There,” Helen said. “Look at you.” She shook her head and a lock of hair fell in front of her face. She laughed and gathered her hair into a sloppy ponytail.

Closing her eyes, she rummaged through the vanity table until her hand settled on a tube of lipstick. She opened one eye so she could take the cap off but kept her eyes shut when she brought the lipstick to her mouth. She pulled her lips taut to help the lipstick go on smoother, and then opened her eyes. The lipstick was a dark red, the color of waxy Red Delicious apples at the supermarket. It was the color her mom wore when she stayed out late with her girlfriends. Turing the tube of lipstick over, Helen read the color on the bottom: “All Night Red,” and she stared at it, surprised, because she could remember her mom coming home late and kissing her goodnight, her lips leaving a small red mark on Helen’s cheek. Helen thought she looked like a clown, and she squinted, trying to remember her mom in the lipstick.

In the mirror, Helen saw the reflection of a jar of loose face powder. The lid said the color was “Fair Ivory,” and Helen picked it up with both hands. Closing her eyes, she tipped the jar upside down and held the powder puff by two fingers, tapping it gently against the inside of the jar. The soft-smelling powder billowed around her face, making her cough, and she blended it into her cheeks, trying not to get it on her mouth. When she
opened her eyes, she saw small flakes of powder sticking to her lipstick and her eyelashes, making her look sick.

Helen took a cigarette from her mom’s pack and held it between her lips. It tasted sweet, like mint, and she took the cigarette from her mouth, holding it between her fingers as if it might break. She sucked on the unlit cigarette and squinted the way her mom did when there was smoke in her eyes.

She tapped the cigarette against an ashtray and put it between her lips as she spoke to herself in the mirror. “What next?”

She opened the top drawer of the vanity table and found a compact of purple eye shadow. She turned it over to read the name: “Crushed Grapes.” Closing her eyes again, she opened the compact and pressed the makeup brush into the powder. Clumsily, she brushed the eye shadow across her eyelid with long sweeping strokes. She covered both eyelids in the purple powder, pressing hard onto the thin skin of her eyelids until it hurt. When she opened her eyes, she thought someone had punched her, and she laughed, laughed at her white teeth, bright behind thick lipstick, at her freckled cheeks, covered under layers of her mom’s makeup.

“Okay,” Helen said. “We’re almost ready.”

She loosened her ponytail holder and wrung out her wet hair over the trashcan. Standing up, she read the labels on the perfume bottles: Cashmere Mist, Jasmine Musk, Allure. Settling on Cashmere Mist, she sprayed it on her wrists and neck. The perfume smelled like her mom’s jacket. Helen sunk to the carpet and sat on her knees, her head on the floor. With her wrist pressed against her nose, Helen breathed slowly and wanted her
mom, but when she closed her eyes she could only see an All Night Red mouth on a Fair Ivory face, and Crushed Grape eyes.

She stood up and folded her arms across her chest. In front of the full-length mirror, she nodded at her reflection. “Would you look at that,” Helen said, and blotted her lips on the hem of her T-shirt. She turned off the light and went downstairs.

The steps by the kitchen were steep, and Helen took them two at a time, landing hard on her bare feet. She set three plates on the table, put three forks on top of them, and took three linen napkins from the drawer by the sink.

“Oh,” she said, as she unfolded the third napkin. She put the extra plate setting away and set out two glasses of ice water.

Helen sat at the table, her mom’s cigarette between her fingers, a glass of ice water at her lips. She put the glass on a napkin and smiled at the red outline of her lips around the edge of the glass, like someone had kissed it. Helen took another sip of water and shook her hand so the ice cubes would clink together. She blew an imaginary puff of smoke out the side of her mouth and let it curl and snake above the table, imagined it sitting on her wet hair like a halo.

She picked up her water and frowned when the napkin stuck to the bottom of the wet glass. Shaking her head, she peeled the napkin away and, her mom’s cigarette still between her fingers, she shook salt over the napkin, then pressed her glass into the grains of salt. Testing her work, she lifted the ice water again and was satisfied when the napkin stayed on the table.

Helen stood up and paced around the kitchen, stepping only on every other dark tile. She stood in front of the refrigerator and opened the freezer. The blast of cold air
made her arm hairs stand up, and she shut the freezer door. She sat on the counter next to the refrigerator and took the radio from up against the wall. Holding it in her lap, she turned the dial, stopping when she heard the soft drone of a sports program. She listened as the announcer gave the final score to the Indians game: The Indians won, 4-3, off a suicide bunt.

“How about that,” Helen said, whistling softly between her teeth.

A pair of headlights swept across the kitchen, and Helen spun the dial on the radio, leaving it on the oldies station her mom liked. She felt her back stiffen as her dad pulled into the driveway, and she jumped down from the counter, knocking over the chair next to her. She stood tip-toe to reach an ashtray from the cupboard above the sink. She lifted the chair, stubbing her toe against it. The pain was strong at first, and Helen thought she might cry. She pushed her toe against the linoleum until it hurt so much that she stopped feeling it. She bit her lip hard and sat down, letting the pain ebb and flow until it went away. Helen waited for the door to open.

Her dad set the grocery bags on the counter and looked at Helen, his smile fading into a glare.

“What the hell did you do?”

Helen turned in her chair and propped her elbow on the table, her mom’s cigarette between her fingers.

“Nothing,” she said.

Her dad took a bottle of beer from one of the paper bags. He pulled open the junk drawer to get a bottle opener, yanking the drawer so hard that it fell, spilling an array of matchbooks, playing cards, and coupons across the floor.
“Here,” Helen said, handing him her mom’s Bic lighter. “You can open it with this.”

Her dad took the lighter and shook his head at Helen as he opened the beer. He didn’t pick up the bottle cap when it fell. He turned his back to Helen and took a long drink from the bottle.

“Clean that shit off your face,” he said, wiping his mouth on his arm. “You look ugly.”

Helen looked at the floor, then at her dad. Her eyes were dry from the makeup, and she closed them, dragging the back of her hand across the purple eye shadow, hoping the color of crushed grapes smeared over half her face, hoping it made her look hideous. She opened her mouth, and she wanted to tell her dad that she thought she might hate him, or that she wished he were blind so he wouldn’t ever have to see her, but instead she took a drink of water. She stared at her dad as she wiped her mouth the way he had done.

“Damnit, Helen. I don’t want you in my sight. Go upstairs and wash your face.”

He put a pot of water on the stove and turned the kitchen light off. He took his beer and went outside, slamming the door behind him. Helen sat in the dark and put her face in her hands; the makeup was sticky and hot on her fingers. She held the glass of ice water, pressed it to her forehead and cheeks.

Helen stood in front of the sink, her face against the window. She watched her dad in the dark and wondered if he felt brave, or if he felt careless. She opened the window, pretended not to see her dad when he looked in the kitchen.
On a Thursday night near the middle of summer, Helen sat between her parents in the auditorium of the Palace Theater. It was her twelfth birthday and they were waiting for the magic show to start.

“I hope this starts on time,” her mom said. “Things like this never start on time.” She took a pink nail file from her purse and began filing her nails. Helen was pretty sure her mom wore fake nails, so she wasn’t sure why she would need to file them.

Helen’s dad looked at his watch. “There’s eleven minutes yet,” he told her. He stretched his legs into the aisle and folded his arms across his chest.

“Well, I just hope it starts on time,” her mom said.

Helen nudged her dad’s arm. “I have to go to the bathroom.”

Her mom touched Helen’s shoulder. “Can’t you wait? You don’t want to miss the beginning,” she said. Her hand was clammy; Helen inched forward in her seat.

“I really have to go. I’ll hurry,” Helen said. Her shoulder felt damp, and she imagined that everyone in the theater could see a wet outline of her mom’s handprint on her yellow T-shirt.

Her dad stood up to let her out. “I have to go too,” he said.

Helen’s mom tapped the nail file against her thigh. “If you have to wait in line, just hold it until intermission. You can’t miss the beginning,” she said.

Helen put her hands in the back pockets of her jeans and followed her dad out to the lobby. She was embarrassed of the way her shoes clicked as she walked across the tiled floor. They were metallic gold dress shoes, a birthday present from her mom. Her
left sock was baggy and kept sliding down her leg, bunching up at her ankle. The shoes were starting to make her feet sweat.

The bathroom was empty, and as Helen sat on the toilet seat she decided that being twelve years old felt a lot like being eleven. She wiped with a thick wad of toilet paper that would have clogged the toilet at home, and then she pushed the toilet handle with her new shoe. She laughed at the thought of her shoe falling off and being flushed down the toilet.

Helen washed her hands in case her mom asked to smell them to make sure they were clean. The paper towel dispenser was empty, and she dried her hands with toilet paper, but it stuck to her fingers in little pieces. She wiped her palms across her jeans and stood in front of the full-length mirror. There was a dark red smudge on the toe of her right shoe and she remembered that she had put the shoes on at the dinner table while eating lasagna. It looked like smeared blood. She spit on her finger and rubbed it into her shoe, then licked her fingers clean as she walked out of the bathroom and into the lobby. The lasagna sauce tasted bitter, and she felt a piece of dirt between her teeth.

“Thought you fell in,” her dad said.

Helen shrugged. “There weren’t any paper towels,” she said. “I had to dry my hands with toilet paper.”

Her dad held open the door to the theater, smiling when he looked at Helen’s feet.

“The light just bounces off those things,” he said, pointing at Helen’s shoes.

“Yeah,” Helen said.

“Bet you could see your reflection in those,” he said as they walked into the auditorium.
“My sock keeps falling,” Helen said. She lifted her leg and tugged at her sock. She looked over her shoulder at her dad.

“Dad, what does beguiling mean?”

He paused, giving her a funny look. “It means that someone is charming or clever. Or it can mean that a person is cheating at something.” He walked beside Helen and guided her to their seats. “What makes you ask?”

Helen pointed toward the entrance as she sat down next to her mom. “The sign out there, it says, ‘Mister Monticello’s bewitching and beguiling magic show.’ I think I know what bewitching means, but I wasn’t sure about beguiling.”

Helen’s mom put her purse on her lap and crossed her legs. “Well, what does it mean, then?”

“That someone is charming or clever,” Helen said. “Or that someone cheats.”

Her mom raised her eyebrows. “Richard, you told her it means that someone cheats?”

He sighed. “Well, that’s what it means. It’s when a person cheats, or tries to be deceptive to make someone else believe something.”

Helen looked at her dad, then turned to her mom. She stretched her mouth into a smile, but no one saw.

The lights in the theater dimmed and Helen settled back in her seat as a drum roll came from backstage. The sound was deep and rumbling, and Helen almost expected a bolt of lightning to travel through the crowd. She pretended that it really would happen and that her new metallic shoes would be lightning rods; they would divert the bolt of electricity and save everyone. The thought made her feel comfortable and safe, like she
knew what everything in the world meant, even when it didn’t make perfect sense. She wanted to lead her parents by the hands, take them outside, and they would all lift their arms in the air, and Helen would say, “Look, this is what the world is.” As the curtains opened, Helen tapped her mom’s leg.

“Thanks for the shoes,” Helen whispered. A piece of hair stuck to Helen’s mouth, tickled her lips. Helen leaned closer. “I really like them,” she whispered, pulling a piece of her mom’s long hair from her mouth. It tasted like hairspray.

“You’re welcome,” her mom whispered.

A loud crack came from the stage, followed by a bright flash of light, and even though Helen knew it was much too quick to be lightning, she jumped in her seat. She felt her dad’s arm jump on the armrest next to her. A tall, gangly man in a knee-length black and red cape stood on stage where the flash of light had been, and Helen wondered if he was cheating already, if he was being deceptive to make people believe him. She was almost certain he was, but she was also pretty sure it didn’t matter.

“Thank you for coming to Mister Monticello’s bewitching and beguiling magic show,” he said in a deep voice. “I am Mister Monticello.”

He took off his magician’s hat and swept his arm low to the ground, revealing a large bouquet of orange and yellow flowers. The audience clapped, and Helen clapped too, even though she didn’t think it was a very good trick.

“The flowers were inside his hat,” Helen’s mom said. She spoke out the side of her mouth.

“I know that,” Helen said. She wasn’t sure how the flowers had actually fit inside his hat, but didn’t tell her mom that.
“My first trick will be a disappearing act,” Mister Monticello said as he took off his hat. He stood in front of a table in the middle of the stage and put his hands on a wire bird cage. The bird cage was empty, and he peered inside, sticking almost his whole head in the cage. He looked around the auditorium and whistled, clapped his hands.

“Guess I have to find her before I can make her disappear,” Mister Monticello said. “Her name is Gracie. If someone would just call her name for me, she’ll show up any minute,” he said.

Someone near the front called out the name, and Helen looked around the theater for the bird, but it was too dark for her to see. Instead, she listened for the fluttering of wings.

Mister Monticello tapped the cage and opened its wire door. He jumped away from the table, and Helen knew he was pretending to be surprised when Gracie suddenly appeared in the cage. “Oh,” he said. “Guess she was there all along.”

The audience laughed, and Helen looked at her mom to see if she thought it was funny. Her mom’s hands were folded in her lap, and Helen thought she looked angry but knew she was probably bored. The magic show hadn’t been her mom’s idea; she had suggested eating at a nice restaurant like they did for every birthday, because after a certain age, a person should stop caring about things like magic shows. Helen wanted to know when her mom had stopped.

Helen didn’t mind the magic show so far. She hoped Mister Monticello would saw someone in half, but she didn’t see a box on the stage that looked big enough for a person. She had never seen a person get sawed in half.
Mister Monticello closed the bird cage and pulled on the door to show the audience that it was locked. Gracie gave a loud whistle, and Mister Monticello draped his cape over the bird cage as Gracie whistled even louder. Helen sat up straight and paid close attention to see if she could figure out the trick. When he lifted his cape, Gracie wasn’t there.

Helen checked underneath the table even though she knew the bird wouldn’t be in the open where everyone could see. She thought Mister Monticello could be hiding Gracie behind his cape, but he lifted his arms to prove there was nothing there.

Someone in the audience whistled, and another person called out Gracie’s name to coax her out of her hiding spot. Mister Monticello lifted the cage and shook it upside down, dropping bird seed and a water bottle on the table. Helen wondered if Gracie would somehow fall out of the empty cage and tumble onto the table. Mister Monticello whipped his cape around the bird cage three times, and the audience clapped when he pulled his cape away to reveal Gracie sitting calmly in her cage.

Helen pulled on her dad’s sleeve. “How did he do that?”

Her dad smiled. “It’s magic,” he said in a deep voice like Mister Monticello’s. He waved his fingers and wiggled his eyebrows. “Magic,” he said again.

Helen laughed, but she didn’t mean it. “No, I mean how did he really do it?”

“I don’t know,” he said. He cleared his throat.

Helen crossed her arms and slipped off her shoes. She considered asking her mom if she knew how Mister Monticello had made the bird disappear, but she figured her mom would have already said something if she knew. She leaned back and put her feet on the
empty seat in front of her. Helen wiggled her toes and tried to imagine what it would be like to make things disappear.

Her mom pushed her leg, and Helen’s foot slipped off the seat.

“Put your feet down,” her mom said, shaking her head. “And put your shoes on.”

“Sorry,” Helen said. She put her feet on top of her shoes and hoped her mom couldn’t see.

On the stage, a woman with red hair and a fancy dress wheeled a box out from behind the curtains. The woman’s dress was covered in sequins, and it caught the light as she walked across the stage. Helen hoped it was time for Mister Monticello to saw someone in half. She wondered if it would be the woman in the sequined dress.

Mister Monticello rubbed his hands together and walked to the front of the stage. “My next trick is a dangerous one,” he said, “but please do not be worried. Nothing has ever gone terribly wrong, and I’ve been doing this my whole life.”

The hinges on the box creaked as Mister Monticello opened the lid, and Helen stretched her neck to see if she could notice anything special about the box, but it looked ordinary. She saw her mom doing the same thing.

The redhead in the shiny dress wheeled a smaller box onto the stage and put it next to Mister Monticello. He opened it and lifted out a pile of swords, holding them against his chest like someone would hold a baby.

“I’m going to need a volunteer for this trick,” he said, placing the swords at his feet.

Nervous laughter came from the audience, and Helen worried that no one would volunteer and he wouldn’t be able to do the trick. She was relieved when a few hands
rose near the front of the stage. Next to her, she felt her mom’s weight shift in the seat. Helen looked at her, then yanked her arm down.

“No,” she said. “What are you doing?”

“I’m volunteering,” her mom said.

“No,” Helen said. “He’s going to saw you in half.”

“I know that,” her mom said. She put her hand up again.

“Mom, no,” Helen said, but Mister Monticello chose someone closer to the front anyway.

Helen bit down hard on her bottom lip and slouched in her seat. Her dad put his arm around her shoulders and his arm hair tickled her neck, but she leaned against him anyway. From the corner of her eye, Helen watched as her dad played with her mom’s hair. Her mom leaned forward and smoothed her hair with her fingers.

“It’s okay,” her dad said. “He wouldn’t have picked your mom anyway. Magicians always have someone they know in the audience because it’s easier to pick a volunteer that way,” he said.

“It’s not really a trick anyway,” her mom said.

Helen watched a young man in a brown suit take off his shoes and step in the box, and she pretended it was her mom up there, stepping into a box to be sawed in half. She pictured her mom’s brown dress boots sitting on the stage, her dark blonde hair spilling out the sides of the box.

“Then what is it?” Helen asked.

“It’s just an illusion,” her mom said.
She took a piece of gum from her purse and offered one to Helen. Helen shook her head.

Mister Monticello closed the lid on the box, and the woman in the dress handed him a sword. He pressed the point against his fingertip and lifted his hand to show the audience the bright circle of blood. He put his finger in his mouth as the woman put a large padlock on the box. Helen held her breath as Mister Monticello put the sword through the box handles.

“It’s just an illusion that makes it look like two halves are being moved apart,” her mom said. Helen could smell her cinnamon gum.

But it’s not two halves,” Helen said.

Helen’s hands began to sweat as Mister Monticello picked up a saw and paced around the box.

“Yes it is,” her mom said.

“No,” Helen said, her eyes wide. “It’s a person, and they’re not being moved apart, they’re being cut apart.”

Mister Monticello moved the saw back and forth across the box, and Helen closed her eyes as she thought of her mom lying inside the box, chewing gum and filing her nails in the dark. She wondered if her mom would close her eyes or leave them open and try not to blink.

* * *

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Helen was almost asleep in the backseat when the car pulled into the driveway. She opened her eyes and stretched her legs. Her left leg was numb, and she punched it until the prickly feeling of needles went away.

“We’re home,” her dad said.

He parked the car in the garage and the three of them sat there without moving. Helen wondered if they would stay like that for hours, not talking or moving until morning. The light bulb in the garage had burnt out two nights ago, and Helen realized she had never been in the garage when it was pitch dark. She stuck out her tongue in the dark, and knew for certain that she didn’t know anything about the world or what it was. When her dad unbuckled his seatbelt, Helen jumped at the sound.

“We’re home,” he said again as he got out of the car.

Helen walked next to her mom, their steps in unison, their shoes crunching against the gravel driveway. She slowed down, walked a step behind and listened to her mom’s footsteps.

Helen could hear Bandit barking inside as her dad stood by the door fumbling with his keys. Bandit’s claws slid across the tile as Helen’s dad unlocked the front door, and before they could step in the house Bandit pushed past them and ran out to the front lawn.

“I’ll stay out here with him until he’s done,” Helen’s dad said.

“Me too,” Helen said. She hugged her arms to her chest and tried to see in the dark. She whistled for Bandit in case he was getting too far away.

Helen’s mom went inside and turned on the porch light. The light fixture made a steady humming noise above them. Helen listened as her mom took off her boots and
tossed them in the hall closet. Her mom came back out in her bare feet, a cigarette between her fingers.

“You guys don’t have to stay out here,” Helen’s dad said.

Helen shrugged. “I know,” she said.

“I thought I’d smoke,” her mom said. “Could be the last warm night of the summer.” She struck a match, holding it until the flame was almost touching the tips of her fingernails. She blew the flame out, and Helen wondered if her mom’s fake nails could catch fire.

Helen walked with her dad across the front lawn, the smoke from her mom’s cigarette hanging behind them. Her eyes had adjusted to the dark, and she watched Bandit sniff around the blackberry bush, his yellow fur so bright it almost glowed. As they approached, Bandit ran over to Helen and pushed his head against her knee, almost knocking her over. Helen steadied herself against her dad’s arm.

“We’ve still got to eat your cake and ice cream,” he said, watching as Bandit ran to the maple tree in the front lawn.

“I know,” Helen said, hoping he couldn’t tell how tired she felt.

They walked to the edge of the garden, and Helen breathed in the sticky-sweet smell of eucalyptus. Her dad pushed his toe into the dirt.

“I hope you liked the magic show,” he said.

“I did,” Helen said. She could taste the eucalyptus plant on her lips.

She heard her mom’s laughter from the porch, a sound so clear and untroubled that Helen thought someone was singing. Helen smiled when she saw her mom’s face, bright
underneath the porch light, and she couldn’t remember the last time her mom had laughed.

“Look,” her mom said, pointing at Bandit. “Poor thing thinks he can catch that firefly,” she said.

Helen watched Bandit jump, his whole body in the air. He barked, snapping his teeth at the firefly, then ran in circles. Helen’s mom laughed again as Bandit tried to follow the firefly up a tree, and Helen thought she wouldn’t mind hearing laughter every day.

“Probably the last firefly of the season,” her dad said.

“I guess fall will be here soon,” Helen’s mom said as she walked off the porch and joined them on the lawn.

“Guess so,” Helen said. She saw a flash of brown and white as a rabbit ran across the driveway and disappeared into the darkness. She remembered reading a Chinese Zodiac chart that said her mom was born in the year of the rabbit, but she couldn’t remember what it meant. For a second, she pretended that Mister Monticello had put an irreversible spell on her mom that turned her into a rabbit. Scanning the yard, she wondered if she had only imagined the rabbit, but Bandit tore across the grass, chasing the small animal down the driveway and into the road.

“Bandit, no,” Helen’s dad said, clapping his hands to get the dog’s attention.

When Helen saw the headlights come around the curve she ran toward the road, yelling for Bandit to come back. Her dad ran ahead of her, and Helen tripped in the damp grass. She watched as the driver of the Jeep slammed on the brakes and tried to swerve
around Bandit, and she watched as Bandit hit the grill of the Jeep, sliding across the road like a heavy bag.

The Jeep pulled into the driveway, and Helen didn’t move from the grass as she watched an old couple and a young boy step out of the car. Helen’s mom sat next to her, and Helen still didn’t move. She flinched, but didn’t pull away when her mom squeezed her hand.

“It’s okay,” her mom said. “He’s fine,” she said, her hand between Helen’s shoulder blades.

Helen nodded, felt tears on her cheeks. A cool breeze brushed across her face, and she could taste the salt of her tears.

“It’s okay,” her mom said again. “He’s going to be okay.”

“You’re lying,” Helen said, trying to catch her breath. “You’re lying to make me believe something.” Her breath came in gulps as she started to sob.

“I’m sorry,” her mom said. She stood up, pushing her weight against Helen’s shoulder. “You’re right.”

Helen covered her ears while her dad and the people from the Jeep stood in a semi-circle around the dog, and Helen didn’t know why no one was taking care of Bandit or making sure he was okay. She stood up, brushed herself off, then walked over to where Bandit lay. She tried to walk past her dad, but he held her back.

“You should go inside,” he said. “Go inside with your mother.”

Helen pushed his hand away and kneeled next to Bandit. The grass around him was dark, and Helen knew it was blood. She knew he wasn’t breathing, but she put her hand
next to his nose just in case. His body jerked, and Helen jumped away. She fell over in
the grass, bumping her head against her mom’s knees.

“Dad, look,” Helen said. “He’s still alive,” she said, but she knew he wasn’t. She
stood beside her dad and tugged at his sleeve.

“I’m sorry, honey,” her dad said. He put his arm around Helen, and she let her body
go slack as she leaned against him. She looked past the road, watched heat lightning flash
across the sky, heard the distant rumble of thunder.

Bandit’s body jerked again, and his legs lifted off the ground as his muscles
convulsed. The woman from the Jeep put her hand over her mouth to muffle her cry. Her
husband held her hand, blinking his eyes hard. Their grandson looked at Helen, then
stared at the ground and lowered the brim of his green baseball cap.

“He’s dead,” Helen said.

The young boy sat on his knees next to Bandit, running his hand over the dog’s
head, smoothing the fur. Helen sat down next to the boy, lifting her chin to stare at him.
The boy took off his hat and wiped his nose on his arm. Helen held Bandit’s paw in her
hands.

“We didn’t mean it,” the boy said. “We could take him to the vet for you,” he said,
turning to look at his grandfather, then at Helen’s dad.

“I don’t think he could make it to the vet,” Helen’s dad said. “And it’s no one’s
fault; it was an accident.”

The young boy nodded and put his hat back on. “I’m Nathan,” he said to Helen.

Helen wondered if she should shake Nathan’s hand. “I’m Helen,” she said, pressing
Bandit’s paw against her leg. “It’s my birthday,” she said.
“Jesus,” the old man whispered.

“How old are you, Helen?” the old woman asked, her voice soft and thin.

“I’m twelve,” Helen said. Helen wanted to tell the woman how it’s not real when a magician saws someone in half, how it’s just an illusion that makes it look like the two halves of a person are being moved apart, but she knew it wasn’t important.

Nathan pressed his knuckles against his knee and looked at the ground. “My birthday was last Tuesday,” he said.

Heat lightning flashed across the sky, coloring the night in dusty yellows and grays. Nathan stood next to his grandmother and held her hand.

Helen’s dad cleared his throat. “We were going to have cake and ice cream,” he said. “The three of you are welcome to join us.”

“Oh, we shouldn’t,” the man said.

“Not after what we’ve done,” the woman said. “We would only be intruding.”

Helen stood next to her dad, shuffled her feet in the grass. Shivering, she crossed her arms and hunched her shoulders.

“You should come inside,” she said to the couple. Her dad draped his jacket over her shoulders, and its warmth was so comforting that Helen wanted to cry.

“If you’re sure it won’t be a bother,” the woman said.

“We’re sure,” Helen’s mom said.

The six of them turned toward the house, dark except for the dim glow of the porch light. The house looked lonely from the outside, and Helen knew it would only be worse inside. They walked in a group toward the front door, but Helen’s dad stayed behind.
“I should do something,” he said, gesturing to the dog, “with him.”

The old man nodded. “I’ll help,” he said.

“Are you going to bury him?” Helen asked.

“Yes,” her dad said.

“In a box?” Helen asked.

Her dad shook his head. “I don’t think there is one. I’ll have to wrap him in an old blanket.”

“Oh,” Helen said. She thought of Bandit buried underneath piles of dirt in the backyard, wrapped in one of the plaid blankets they kept in the damp basement. She worried she was going to be sick.

Helen’s dad looked at her and nodded. He pulled at his chin, pinching the skin between his fingers. “I’ll just wrap him in a tarp tonight, and we’ll bury him tomorrow after I get a box,” he said.

“Okay,” Helen said.

She turned around as her dad and Nathan’s grandfather stood on either side of Bandit and lifted him off the ground. Helen’s mom and Nathan’s grandmother stood next to each other on the porch; they were smoking cigarettes, and it looked like they had been standing there for hours, like they could keep standing there forever. They put out their cigarettes in the ashtray and went inside. Helen looked at Nathan, and she pointed at the house, raising her eyebrows.

“Well,” she said, and started walking.

Nathan fell into step beside her and looped his thumbs through his belt loops.

“That’s nice of your dad to get a box for your dog,” he said.
“He’s probably only doing it because it’s my birthday,” Helen said.

“It’s still nice,” Nathan said.

When they got to the driveway, Helen slipped off her shoes and carried them underneath her arm. The gravel was cold underneath her stocking feet.

“These shoes make my feet sweat,” Helen said.

“I like them,” Nathan said, pointing at the gold shoes.

“Thanks,” Helen said. “They were a birthday present from my mom.”

Helen watched through the kitchen window as her mom handed Nathan’s grandmother a mug of instant coffee. Her mom said something, and it must have been funny, because Nathan’s grandmother laughed with her mouth open. Helen’s mom laughed too, her hand covering her mouth.

“My mom didn’t get me anything for my birthday,” Nathan said.

“Why not?” Helen asked.

Nathan shrugged. “I’ve never really met her.”

They stood on the porch, looking at each other underneath the light. Nathan’s eyes were dark blue, and his right eye was lazy; Helen liked the way it drifted off to the side, like one eye was always trying to catch up with the other, or like he was looking at two things at once. Helen thought it would be nice to have eyes like that.

“Oh.” She stared at him, first at his right eye, then his left.

Nathan shrugged his shoulders again. “Yeah.” He scratched his forehead and lowered his head. “We should go inside so you can eat your cake,” he said, barely looking at her from underneath his hat.

Helen sighed. “I know,” she said, “but I don’t think I want to.”
Nathan put his hands in his pockets and leaned against the porch railing. “All right.”

Helen watched her dad and Nathan’s grandfather put Bandit down on top of a blue tarp. She wanted to look away, but she kept staring as they wrapped the tarp around the dog. They left it in a heap by the garage and walked toward the side door by the kitchen.

Helen stood across from Nathan. She narrowed her eyes and scratched her arm.

“Why are your eyes like that?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “They just are.” Nathan crossed his arms.

“Okay,” Helen said. She put her hand on the door knob. “I guess they’re waiting for us,” she said, and opened the door.

She put her shoes on the floor and draped her dad’s jacket over the back of an easy chair. Her dad and Nathan’s grandfather came in through the side door, and the kitchen was loud with the sound of the four adults talking as they set the table for six.

“I like them,” Helen said without looking at Nathan. “Your eyes, I mean.”

She pointed Nathan toward the kitchen, and she walked behind him, thinking she should have said she was sorry about his mom.

The adults were still talking as Helen and Nathan stood side by side at the sink, washing their hands. The air in the kitchen was humid, and Helen splashed her face with water. She dried her face and hands, then gave Nathan the towel.

Her mom turned out the lights in the kitchen, and Helen turned to face the table. The room was restless, and Helen was surprised when she felt a desperate desire to never have to say anything for the rest of her life. The candles lit up the room, casting shadows
on everyone’s face as they sang the Happy Birthday song, their lips barely moving. Helen squeezed her eyes shut, hoped to disappear forever.

When they stopped singing, Helen kept her eyes closed and pretended she was making a wish. Nothing had changed; she knew she hadn’t disappeared, she knew it was a stupid wish. She took a deep breath and opened her eyes.

“Don’t forget to make a wish,” her mom said.

Helen blew out the candles in one breath. “I didn’t forget,” she said, and turned on the lights.

The cake was chocolate with chocolate frosting, and Helen wanted to heave it against the wall like it was a pile of mud. It was decorated to look like a softball field, with “Happy Birthday, Helen” written across the outfield. Her dad cut the piece by home plate and set it in front of Helen.

“What did you wish for?” he asked.

Helen put some of the sugary frosting in her mouth and stared at her dad. “Nothing,” she said. She swallowed the frosting, then dabbed her mouth with a napkin. Her dad cut the rest of the cake, and the kitchen was silent except for the sound of forks scraping against plates.

“Helen, why don’t you tell Nathan about the magic show,” Helen’s dad said.

Helen put her fork down and drank the rest of her milk. “I don’t feel like it.”

She stood up from the table, her hands gripping the back of her chair. She licked her lips and watched as her knuckles went white.

“I’m going to be sick,” she said, and ran out the door.
Outside, she dropped to her knees and tried to throw up, but nothing happened. She made her hand into a fist and pushed it hard against her stomach. The door opened, and she lifted her head, turning away from the light that spilled across the grass.

“I’m fine,” she said, her back to her mom. “Go inside,” she said.

Her mom stood in the doorway. “Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes, just leave me alone,” Helen said.

When Helen heard the door close, she leaned over again and stuck her finger down her throat until she threw up. She sat up straight, leaned her head back, her shoulders heaving as she took deep gulps of breath, like she was trying to drink the darkness. She looked at the heap of blue tarp by the garage, and walked toward it thinking about all the things it could be as she reminded herself of what it was.

Standing above Bandit, Helen tried not to breathe in the smell of his blood as she picked him up. She stumbled against the deadweight, pushing the dog away from her when he landed on her legs. She stood up again and wrapped her arms around his middle, then slowly dragged him into the garage. The garage was dusty, and Helen sneezed as she took a burlap sack off the shelf and shook it off, spread it out next to Bandit. She closed the garage door and sat down, her palms flat against the burlap sack. She kept her eyes opened and tried not to blink, staring at the walls until the darkness felt like thick layers of silence.

Someone inside the house opened the side door, and Helen could hear the soft voices of her parents. Helen listened as they said goodbye to Nathan and his grandparents. She heard their jeep pull slowly out of the driveway and thought she should have said goodbye to Nathan. She closed her eyes and pretended to be asleep when she
heard her dad walking across the driveway. He opened the garage door and whispered her
name, but Helen didn’t answer. He patted her hand, and Helen wondered if he knew she
was only pretending. He sighed, knelt beside her, and tugged gently on her arm.

He walked with her toward the house, Helen’s ear pressed against his arm. She
wanted to close her eyes and tell him that everything she had thought about the world was
wrong; it wasn’t even close.
The Drought

That summer, it stopped raining at the beginning of July. It didn’t rain for two months. The dry grass was like sharp pieces of wood against the skin. It was ninety-five degrees or more for two months straight, and we were afraid the heat would never go away. People were listless from it, and sometimes it was as if they needed reminding to stay alive.

Shortly after my twelfth birthday, my parents divorced. They stopped loving, they had said, and I wasn’t sure if they meant they had stopped loving everything, or just each other. They had said it happened all the time—people just stopped loving for no reason.

Mom went to Maine and stayed with Aunt Linda. It was far away, but she said she had always wanted to live close to the water anyway. Aunt Linda lived on a houseboat, and Mom said the calm waters would help her sleep. Besides, she said, she didn’t have anywhere else to go. She said I could visit anytime I wanted. When I watched her pack her suitcases, I remember wondering if I would ever see her again.

It was Dad and me after that, and he let me come and go as I pleased. I spent most of my time with Alan Charters and his younger sister, Margaret. They made the long days seem not as long, and I wanted to be like them. When I started talking to Alan and Margaret that summer, I had told them that, after my parents divorced, Dad had started working more at the hospital, which was why he was never home at night. Later, I told them the truth, which was that Dad didn’t even work at a hospital and that he was never home at night because he went to Sully’s Tavern so he didn’t have to be alone. I didn’t want to be alone either, so I was out of the house nearly every day.
I knew that loneliness hurt, but I didn’t think Dad and I could be alone together. When I was in the woods, or swimming in the pond, I tried to spend a great deal of time thinking about laughter. I didn’t always have a reason to laugh, so I laughed a lot for no reason at all.

That summer, during the drought, Alan kissed me in the woods on the same day I saw a dead body for the first time.

It happened on a Tuesday, but it could have been any day. Alan and I were walking on Fairline Avenue, and the sun was so hot on our backs it felt as if we were walking through flames, but that didn’t matter anymore. Neither one of us had said anything since we had started our walk. I was thirsty, and my tongue felt like it was smothered in thick cotton balls.

“Where’s Margaret?” I asked.

“Mom wouldn’t let her leave today because she has poison ivy real bad,” Alan said. “It looks like someone colored with red marker all over her face.”

“Oh. “What do you want to do today?”

Alan shrugged his shoulders. He held a pile of rocks in his hand, and I watched as he threw one into the cornfield.

“Let’s run through Crawford’s cornfield,” Alan said.

“Okay,” I said.

“Don’t stop until you get to the other side,” Alan said.
Wind rushed at my face as I took off into the field. I couldn’t see where I was going, I couldn’t see Alan, but I kept running. I thought I could run forever. The wavy leaves were like arms reaching out to hold me, letting go as I ran away, and the cornstalks hurt as they scraped against my skin. My fingertips grazed against Alan’s, and he grabbed my hand, held it tight as we ran, the cornstalks bending behind us like hands waving goodbye.

We tumbled into the ditch at the edge of the cornfield, falling down as though we had been thrown. Laughing, we lay in the grass and tried to catch our breath. There was silence all around us, but I listened closely for the echo of laughter. Alan was still holding my hand and it felt like I was still running, but I also couldn’t remember the last time I felt as motionless as I did then. I pulled my hand from his and draped my arm across my forehead. I knew I couldn’t look Alan in the eye.

A crow flew in lazy circles above the cornfield, then it was joined by another. They stopped and landed on a telephone pole, and I wondered if they were looking for something.

“There are ravens in Maine that are almost two feet tall,” I said, gesturing with my hand.

“Really?” Alan said. His voice sounded far away. “When a group of them fly together, the flock is called an unkindness.”

“Oh,” I said. My mouth formed the words silently: an unkindness. I wanted to say it out loud.

“How do you know the ravens are that big?” Alan asked.
“I don’t know. I just do.” I sat up. “How do you know what a group of ravens is called?”

He sat up, too and shrugged his shoulders. “My dad told me.”

The crows on the telephone pole looked down at us, and I wondered if they could see us. Everyone probably looks the same to them. From far away, their small eyes looked like my mother’s black onyx earrings. The crows flew off, swooping into the cornfield then back up again. I watched until they were small black dots against the sky.

“What time is it?” I asked Alan.

“I don’t know.” He looked at the sky. “Two, maybe three, o’clock.”

“Maybe it will rain today,” I said.

“Probably not.”

“I want to go swimming,” I said.

I didn’t know if I really wanted to, but the pond was in the woods behind the Edgerly’s house, and the water would be like a cold bath this time of day.

“All right,” Alan said. “I have to go home and get my swimsuit.”

My skin was itching to get in the water, and I started running toward home. “I’ll see you at the pond,” I said over my shoulder.

I didn’t stop running until I reached the driveway. Dad’s car was parked in the garage, and I wondered why he was home so early. Lately, the empty house had reminded me of a mouth with missing teeth, full of gaping holes where familiar things had once been. I opened the door quietly and imagined I was walking into a stranger’s
house. The mirror by the front door was gone; it was in Maine where Mom was, but I still looked for it every time I came home. There was a clean white square on the wall where the mirror had been.

Dad was in the kitchen, leaning against the sink. His back was to me and he was looking out the window. I tried not to make a sound as I walked toward the steps, but he turned around.

“You’re home early,” I said, walking away.

He shook his head. “It’s five-thirty.”

“Oh, I thought it was earlier.”

He turned around again, and I ran up the steps two at a time. I wanted to say something to him, wanted to tell him about running through the cornfield and holding Alan’s hand, but I kept walking away. I changed into my swimsuit and knew I would probably never tell him how I had felt free and lost running through the cornfield. I put my clothes on over my suit and told myself it was easy to ignore everything in the house.

When I walked downstairs, he was sitting at the table, a cup of coffee in his hand. The way his fingers were holding it so tight made it look as though he had glued himself to the cup. Steam rose from the coffee, and I wondered if it would burn his mouth.

“Your mother called,” he said.

I stopped. It felt like being slapped in the face, but I didn’t know why. “What did she want?”

“To say hello, I guess.”
I opened the refrigerator and let the cool air cover my body. “Oh,” I said. I closed the refrigerator and stared at its blank white surface. “I’m going swimming. Alan’s waiting for me.”

I stood in front of the table, waiting for him to say something.

“You should call her back tonight,” he said. He lifted the mug to his mouth, then set it down without drinking from it.

“Okay,” I said.

I pushed my thumb against the table and saw how close my hand was to his. There was a small pile of crumbs on the table, and I spread them out like a star, then pushed them into a pile again. I swept the crumbs off the table and onto the floor.

“Did you know that a group of ravens is called an unkindness?” I said. Like us, I almost said.

“I didn’t know,” he said.

I walked out of the kitchen, and a nagging feeling of sadness mixed with repulsion almost made me want to turn around. I had never felt that before, but somehow I knew that was what pity felt like.

“Helen,” he said.

I paused by the front door, looking at the blank spot on the wall.

“She didn’t want to leave you,” he said.

I nodded my head, then remembered he couldn’t see me. “I know,” I said.

* * *
Alan was already in the water when I got to the pond. My hair was sticking to my face and I could feel small drops of sweat on my chest. Like rain, I thought, as I peeled off my clothes. For some reason, I was embarrassed for Alan to see me in my swimsuit, even though we had gone swimming together almost every day for two months. Feeling embarrassed of my own body made me angry, so I stood there even longer, my feet planted squarely on a mound of dirt. Finally, I took a few steps back, then ran and jumped into the deepest part of the pond.

I opened my eyes under the murky water and watched the surface get closer and closer. I tried to stay under for as long as possible, holding my breath until I thought I would drown. When I came up for air, the brightness surprised me; it was as though I had torn through the sky. I tried to pretend I was seeing everything for the first time, but I couldn’t fool myself. Everything looked the same as it always had.

“I could stay like this for hours,” Alan said. He was floating on his back, and he made small ripples in the water with his toes. His eyes were closed, and I smiled at his face.

I swam to the shallow water and floated on my back, dragging my hand across the muddy bottom of the pond. I closed my eyes and remembered how Mom said the calm waters in Maine would help her sleep. Maybe she was sleeping now. Maybe I would call her later and tell her how calm the water was at home.

I imagined myself as a crow, floating across the water. Maybe floating felt exactly like flying. I closed my eyes and let myself drift around the pond. I pushed against the bottom, felt mud underneath my fingernails. My toe bumped against Alan’s leg, and I lifted my head to look at him. His eyes were still closed. He grabbed my foot, wrapped
his fingers around my ankle and kept them there. I closed my eyes again. I don’t know how long we stayed that way, but when I opened my eyes, the sun had started to disappear behind the trees.

“Let’s not,” Alan said. He let go of my ankle and dove under the water. It was like watching someone disappear.

I thought we could stay there all night. I wanted lightning bugs and shadows and moonlight for dinner. I wanted a bed made of muddy water. I didn’t want to go home. I wanted Alan’s hand on my ankle again.

“My mom called me today,” I said. Right away, I wished I hadn’t said it.

Alan spat water out of his mouth and smoothed down his dark brown hair. “Where is your mom?”

“Maine,” I said. “In a houseboat.” I dove under water and tried to swim the length of the pond. I didn’t even make it halfway. When I reached the surface, Alan was right next to me.

“That’s how you knew about the ravens,” he said.

I nodded and felt myself blush.

“When is she coming back?”

I slapped my hands against the water and watched the tiny splashes. “I don’t think she is.”

“Ever?” Alan asked.
“Ever,” I said.

I swam to the edge of the pond, and when I got out of the water I felt cold. I leaned against a tree, and the bark was rough against the thin fabric of my one-piece swimsuit. Alan sat next to me, his arm resting against mine. Drops of water clung to the short hairs on his arm. I could feel dirt sticking to my wet skin, and I wondered if Alan felt the same thing.

“Hey,” he said.

His voice was soft, and I almost smiled when I looked at him.

“I’m going to kiss you on the mouth,” he said.

“Why?” I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

“That’s fine,” I said.

I wondered if I should lick my lips first. They felt chapped from swimming. I waited for him to close his eyes, but he didn’t, and I watched his face move closer. When his lips pressed against mine, we stared at each other until I laughed. He moved, but our faces were still inches apart.

“Why did you laugh?”

I had never kissed anyone before and I wanted to kiss Alan again. It had tickled; had been like rubbing my lips against the soft fuzz of a peach.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Aren’t we supposed to close our eyes?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“That’s how my parents do it,” I said. “That’s how they used to do it.”

“Okay,” Alan said, and pressed his lips against mine.
We kept our eyes open, and when I felt his mouth smiling against mine, I closed my eyes. I opened them again, and saw him staring at me.

Alan held my hand as we walked through the woods behind the Edgerly’s. My clothes clung to my damp swimsuit, and my sneakers made sucking noises with each step. The dry ground cracked as we walked on it, and I pictured it giving way layer by layer, like pieces of tissue paper.

“Smells like rain,” Alan said.

“Yeah,” I said, lifting my head skyward. The air was musky, like a deep perfume.

We kept walking, and I thought maybe we could walk in circles all night so I wouldn’t have to go home. I thought of Dad sitting alone at the kitchen table, or leaning against the sink, looking out the window.

Alan pointed at a tree not more than forty feet from us. “What’s that?” he asked.

“I can’t see anything,” I said. It was almost completely dark and I could hardly see anything between the trees.

“Look, right there. In the tree,” he said.

I tried to cry out, but my voice didn’t make a sound. A man’s body hung from a rope tied to a branch. I thought of Dad and I thought about praying, even though I had never prayed before. It was like being in a dream where I kept moving my mouth, trying to say something, but my mouth would only open and close, silently. I was trying to say “please, no,” and I was trying to shout it over and over again.
We got closer, and I could see that it wasn’t Dad. I told myself that I hadn’t really thought it was him. He was still at home, alone and alive.

The man in the tree wasn’t wearing any shoes and his dirty white socks, hanging a few feet above the ground, were inside-out. A dark wet circle had formed around his crotch, and his tongue stuck out between his lips. I tried to turn my head, but I kept staring at his face. The dim light in the woods made his features look soft, like putty. Except for his tongue sticking out, his face was calm.

When I opened my mouth again to scream, my voice came out warbled, like static on a radio station. I let go of Alan’s hand, flung it away as though he were carrying poison, and hugged my arms against my chest.

I backed away from the tree. “That’s Mr. Edgerly,” I whispered.

Alan walked around the body. It looked warm, and I felt sick. He took a stick from the ground and poked Mr. Edgerly’s foot. The body moved stiffly back and forth, then hung still again. Alan threw the stick deep into the woods and wiped his hands on his jean shorts. I covered my mouth with my hand, bit down hard on the flesh of my palm.

“He looks like he could be sleeping,” Alan said.

I took my hand away from my mouth and nodded. “How long do you think he’s been there?”

Alan moved closer to him. “I don’t know. He wasn’t here when we came to the pond.”

“No,” I said. “Should we tell someone?”

Alan wiped the back of his hand across his eyes. “Probably.”
He stood next to me and held out his hand. “Let’s go home now.”

“Okay,” I said, taking his hand.

We were silent as we walked the rest of the way through the woods. I wondered if I would cry. I wondered if I should have prayed.

“Do you think it hurt for Mr. Edgerly?” I asked.

Alan looked back at the woods and squeezed my hand. “Probably only for a second,” he said.

I kicked a rock, watched it bounce across the road. I didn’t know what else to do. I felt a raindrop land on my arm. I looked up, felt another raindrop on my cheek. I didn’t want to go home.

“I wonder why he did it,” Alan said.

“Sometimes people just stop loving for no reason at all,” I said quietly.

I could see my house in the distance. It was dark, and I saw headlights leaving the driveway.
Important and Cold

Kate and I were in the girl’s bathroom at Fairfield Middle School when it happened. I was thirteen but not stupid, I knew right away what it was. It was blood, a dark red blot of it in my underwear. I held my breath and stared, wished for it to be anything else.

I could hear Kate tapping her feet on the bathroom tile. “Hurry up,” she said.

“My zipper’s stuck,” I said.

It would leave a stain, a blurry smudge like muddy fingerprints. The color of dried blood had always embarrassed me. Someone would see it, I knew it. Kate, my dad, my dad’s girlfriend, everyone in the cafeteria, they would all know what had happened.

“Helen,” Kate said.

When she spoke, I wanted more than anything for her to be older, I wanted her to be a mother, not necessarily my own, but someone’s. I wanted someone to place their hand on my shoulder and tell me exactly what to do next.

“I told you, my zipper. Just go back without me.”

I didn’t want to tell Kate, or anyone. I waited for her to leave, but knew she wouldn’t. It was strange; I had always thought it would hurt more. I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to skip this day and the next few, wake up without blood in my underwear. But if anyone ever asked, at least I could have said no, this does not really hurt.

“Are you sick or something?” Kate asked.

“No. Maybe a little.” I coughed and knew it sounded fake.

“Oh, God,” Kate said.
I could hear the smile in her voice. She opened the stall door next to me and I quickly shoved a wad of toilet paper in the crotch of my underwear and pulled up my jeans, fumbling with the button. My fingers were cold against my skin.

“I know what happened, Helen. You started your period, didn’t you?”

Of course Kate would guess just like that, and in a second when she stood on the toilet in the stall next to me and peered over the wall she would know for sure, just from looking at my face. And maybe that’s how it would be with everyone, obvious in one glance. It already felt like being blamed for something. I flushed the toilet and watched my blood disappear.

“Didn’t you?” Kate asked, peeking her head over the wall. Her brown eyes were bright and I thought she might start crying for me.

I pushed open the tan stall door and let it bang shut behind me, wondering if I had the strength to rip it off its hinges. I stood in front of the sink and pressed my hands against the cool white porcelain.

“Fine, yes. I did. It’s not a big deal. We’ll just go back to lunch.”

Kate smiled and grabbed my arms, pulled me away from the sink. “You’re so lucky. I wish it was me.”

I pushed her away. “Shut up, Kate. It’s just a little blood.”

She looked hurt, and I knew why. I felt bad for pushing her, but if she was jealous it meant I had something she wanted. It meant I was different. I felt drops of sweat in my armpits.

“Okay,” she said. “But you need to use something. Do you have anything?”

“I don’t know. What would I have?”
I washed my hands, worried the blood had spread and would leave dots all over my skin like a rash. Maybe it was possible to have an allergic reaction to your own blood. I looked at my face in the mirror and thought my blonde hair, still streaked from the summer sun, looked stringy and limp, as though someone had placed a dirty mop on my head. My cheeks looked red and splotchy.

“You know, a pad or something,” Kate said.

Kate watched me in the mirror, and I wondered if she was appraising my body, counting all the ways she could tell that I was having a period.

I shrugged. “I used toilet paper. It’s probably a fluke anyway.”

We walked out of the bathroom and I stared straight ahead, focused on the door at the end of the hallway. Maybe it would be gone by morning. I could feel Kate turning her head to stare at me, a smile taking over her tanned face.

“I’ll stop at the drugstore on the way home and buy something,” I said, trying to sound natural, and I wouldn’t have admitted to anyone that it felt good, in a way, to say something so grown-up. It was something Mom would have said.

At the lunchroom, I stopped in the hallway and held out my arm, forcing Kate to stop.

“Don’t tell anyone,” I said.

She nodded. “I won’t.”

The lunchroom was crowded, seemed to have twice as many people. It smelled of cleaning products and macaroni. Everyone’s movements were animated, and all their faces looked prettier and more hopeful than my own. I didn’t belong. It felt like the time two summers ago when I had the wind knocked out of me at the pond. Alan and I had
tied a rope from the farthest-reaching branch, and when I hit the water it had felt like drowning. The panic had only lasted a few seconds, but I remember being afraid for my life.

“Is there any blood on my pants?” I asked Kate.

“No, but here, take my sweater just in case.” She handed me her brown cardigan, which I tied around my waist. It seemed like the nicest thing anyone had ever done for me. I hoped I wouldn’t stain her sweater.

“I don’t want to go in there,” I said. Right away, I knew I had to leave. “I’m going home,” I said.

“You’ll get in trouble,” Kate said.

“I don’t care. Tell them I got sick.”

I grabbed my book bag out of my locker and started walking toward the east exit of the school. The hallway was wide and empty. If I screamed, the echo would bounce back and forth off the red and black lockers. It would feel good to scream. I probably would get in trouble for leaving, but I didn’t care, not too much. When I pushed the heavy black doors open, I ran past the flagpole and the row of maple trees, the reddish-brown and yellow leaves crisp like crinkled newspaper. I ran down the sidewalk in front of the school, imaging a trail of blood behind me.

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When I got to Klein’s drugstore, I was out of breath and sweaty. The toilet paper in my underwear was damp with blood and chafed against the tops of my thighs as I walked down the aisles. The drugstore was empty and quiet. The fluorescent lights shined
on a display of animal figurines made out of clay. They were covered in a thin layer of
dust and it felt lonely to look at them.

I worried the toilet paper would fall out of place, hang out of my pant leg and
stick to my shoe. When I found the pads, I reached for a green package, the kind Mom
had sometimes brought home.

A sales clerk walked down the aisle, stopped a few feet from me. Her nametag
said “Sherry,” and she looked familiar, but I couldn’t place why.

“You finding everything you need?” Her smile was sincere and I liked that.

I nodded. “Yes. Thank you,” I said and remembered how I knew her. Her
daughter, Theresa, was on my softball team.

Sherry started to walk away, then turned around. “I’m not trying to pry, but didn’t
school start two weeks ago?”

I knew she wondered why I wasn’t in school, but she was too nice to accuse me of
skipping. It didn’t feel right to lie to someone like that, so I decided to only tell half a lie.
Besides, she had asked an easy question.

“Yes, ma’am, but it’s lunchtime now. They let us leave for lunch,” I said.

My hand was still gripping the green package, labeled “sanitary napkins.” I
imagined I was palming a basketball, even though I knew my hand wasn’t big enough to
do that.

“I’m just going to buy this,” I said, holding the package at my chest, “then I’m
going back to school.” I nodded and tried to smile.

Sherry came a few steps closer and put her hand on my shoulder. I could smell
her shampoo. “You know how to use those, right?”
I wanted to cry hard enough to sob, right in the middle of Klein’s drugstore. My face felt hot and I hated Mom for leaving. It was supposed to be her job to take care of everything that made me afraid.

Sherry took my arm and we walked toward the cash register. “It’s easy. You just take off the sticky part and put it on your underpants. Easier than tampons, at least,” she said, smiling as though we had known each other a long time.

“Oh, I said. “Thank you.”

I gave her a crumpled five dollar bill from my back pocket that had been through the wash, and stuffed the change and the pads in the front pocket of my book bag.

“Take care,” Sherry said. She gave me the receipt. “Change it when it gets too messy.”

“Oh,” I said. “The pad?”

Sherry smiled, and I wondered if she practiced smiling in the mirror. I pictured her standing in her bathroom, holding her dark brown curly hair away from her face, admiring her straight, white teeth, thinking about how good it felt to care about people.

“That’s right, and use a heating pad or take aspirin if you get cramps,” she said.

“All right. I will.”

The bell on the door rang when I left, and when I ran the twenty minutes home, the wind was cool against the tears on my cheeks. I didn’t know why I was crying. I bit down hard on the inside of my cheek and reminded myself that it didn’t hurt. There was blood, but no pain, and if it didn’t really hurt, there was no reason to cry.
At home, I dropped my book bag on the table and went straight to the bathroom by the kitchen and locked the door. It was quiet in there, and when I opened the pads, I was glad the house was empty. The toilet paper in my underwear looked like something that would be part of a cheap Halloween costume, and I shoved it into the wastebasket, put the light green wrapper from the pad on top of it. After I put the pad in my underwear, I stood up, pulled up my pants and looked at myself in the full-length mirror by the door. The pad felt bulky, but didn’t show through my pants. I put the rest of the package underneath the sink, hoping Dad would be embarrassed when he saw them.

I stood in the middle of the kitchen and felt the silence of the empty house. The clock by the microwave hummed in a steady, hushed tone. The clock read 1:30, but it was ten minutes fast. The house had always been silent, even all the years Mom was there. The three of us had talked in whispers, or not at all, which was probably worse than screaming. I don’t think we ever had enough things to say to each other, and I figure that’s partly why Mom left. Right after she left, the silence took over the house like a disease. For a while, I had pretended Dad and I were two deaf people living together, and if we had known how, we would have talked to each other. If Mom were here now, I guess I would be able to tell her about my period.

Ever since Dad had started seeing Brenda six months ago, our house had gradually started coming to life. Brenda laughed more than Mom had, and I guess she was funnier than Mom, because Dad laughed more, too. But now, standing in a pool of afternoon sunlight in the empty kitchen, the house was lonesome and quiet again.

The phone rang, and I sat at the kitchen table listening. It reminded me that I could call Mom in Maine and tell her, but I think I knew what she would say. First, she
would tell me congratulations, because people did that, as if I had worked very hard to finally have a period. Then, I would tell her that it didn’t hurt, but I wouldn’t tell her about crying on the way home from the drugstore. After that, she would tell me that it wasn’t supposed to hurt anyway, and she would probably say that a lot of other things would hurt, but not this.

When the phone stopped ringing, I tried to remember the last time I talked to Mom. At first, she called almost every day. I didn’t always answer, which is why she stopped. For the past few months, we had been talking every other week or so. Our conversations were slow and sometimes I tried to make her feel homesick, but this wasn’t her home anymore.

I filled a glass with water from the sink and drank it in one swallow. I took Kate’s cardigan from the table and went out to the garage where Dad kept the .22 rifle for target practice. He kept it in a box underneath a shelf, and he never kept it loaded because he said it wasn’t safe to keep a loaded gun around. I always figured that if someone ever needed to protect themselves, the only safe gun would be a loaded one.

I grabbed some soup cans from the recycle bin to use for targets and took the gun and some bullets out of the metal box. The .22 was heavy in my hand; it felt important and cold. I loaded the rifle, and I knew how to do it from watching Dad. He had said I wasn’t old enough to shoot the gun by myself, but I figure having a period should make me old enough.

In the backyard, I set the cans in a row on the grass about sixty feet out and kneeled on the ground, steadied the rifle on my shoulder. I closed one eye to aim, but stood up when I felt someone standing beside me. My finger on the trigger, I turned
around, facing the afternoon sun. I pointed the barrel of the gun in front of me, but it was only Alan. It was the first time I had pointed a gun at someone’s chest, and if it had been someone other than Alan, I probably would have shot someone for the first time in my life.

“Jesus,” he said, and held his hands up.

“Sorry.” I lowered the gun and shrugged. “Target practice.” I pointed at the row of cans.

“I thought you were sick,” he said.

“I am sick.”

I knelt down again, felt wet leaves under my knees, and put the rifle back on my shoulder. I took aim and pulled the trigger. It was a good thing the neighbors were too far away to hear. The gunshot sounded like someone coughing into a microphone. The bullet barely nicked the side of the can, and I stood up as the can wobbled back and forth. It landed softly in the grass. I wished I had hit it dead center.

Alan whistled softly between his teeth. “Why aren’t you at school?” I asked without looking at him.

“I don’t know. I left before last period.”

“Oh,” I said, and felt angry. “I started my period.” I watched Alan’s face. I wanted to make him uncomfortable.

“Really?” He shifted his feet and stared at the ground. “Let me see that rifle,” he said.

“Can you shoot a gun?” I asked. “I’m not giving it to you if you can’t.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Sure.”
“All right. The recoil’s only slight, but it’s enough to set you off balance.”

I watched Alan take the rifle, and I knew he felt important the same way I had. He clenched his jaw, held his angular face in concentration and kneeled on the grass. I wondered if it felt like blood when the damp leaves soaked through his jeans, staining his knees. Alan and I were probably boyfriend and girlfriend, but we hadn’t started calling it that. We kissed a lot, and I liked kissing him, but having my period made me wonder if it meant we were supposed to start having sex together. I had never really thought much about sex, and I didn’t know if Alan had either. He licked his lips and tightened his grip on the rifle.

He pulled the trigger and hit the soup can I had already knocked over. It jumped from the impact, then rolled through the grass. When Alan stood up, he looked proud.

I took the rifle from him, put the safety on and held it in both my hands. “We can’t have sex, you know. I mean, not right now. I’m on my period,” I said.

Alan’s face turned red. “I didn’t want to anyway.”

“Good,” I said, looking at the four soup cans still standing.

“You mean ever?” Alan asked.

“No, I mean if we wanted to right now, we couldn’t.”

“Right,” he said.

I undid the safety on the .22 and aimed at one of the cans, held the rifle with one hand. It was too heavy, and my hand wasn’t steady. I held it against my shoulder and pulled the trigger. The second can fell over in the grass. A small gray bird flew above the cans, and I thought about shooting it, about watching it drop from the sky, but knew I didn’t want to.
Alan sat on the grass, and I put the rifle down and sat next to him. I bent my legs and rested my elbows on my knees. The sun was behind us, I could feel it warming my back.

“Why’d you bring up sex?” he asked.

“Because I started my period. That’s what it means.” I pulled the cardigan sweater over my hands.

“It means having sex?”

“No, it means I can.”

Alan scratched his chin and looked at me. “Who told you that?”

“No one,” I said. A few minutes ago, I had felt older and more mature than Alan, but now I felt useless and tired.

“You can have sex, but you could have done it before. I think it mostly means that now you could, you know, have a baby. If you wanted, I mean,” Alan said.

The gray bird landed by an overturned soup can, and I was glad I hadn’t shot it. I had never wanted to kill anything, probably because I knew how it felt to be afraid for your life.

“Oh. God,” I said. My stomach hurt, and I could feel it pressing against the waistband of my jeans. “I know that. I’m not stupid,” I said.

Alan put his arm around my waist. “I know,” he said.

I traced my finger along the handle of the rifle, felt its smoothness like a stone under water. I could be a mother. If I wanted to, I could have a baby and be its mother.

“Do you want to shoot the gun anymore?” I asked.

Alan shook his head. “Do you?”
“No, not really,” I said.
Someone Else

Dad started breaking world records when we moved to New Mexico. The first was in 1952 when he reached 400 miles per hour on land. The whole world knew who he was, probably better than I did. Two years later, the same day he turned forty-two, Dad broke his own record when he got up to 631 miles per hour in his rocket-propelled sled on a track at the Holloman Air Force Base. All the newspapers called him the fastest man alive, and they were right. It was exactly what he wanted, though not at first.

Mom stayed behind at the ballet center in Cleveland when we moved. She had said it was her life. She had been a ballerina since the moment she could walk. We moved to the base so Dad could conduct research with the 846th Test Squadron. The research was about plane crashes and why some pilots survived them while others didn’t.

I was in high school, but I still thought Dad could do anything. For a while, I thought he wasn’t afraid of anything. That wasn’t possible, though. When I was younger, I had learned the word phobia in school, which means an abnormal or morbid fear or aversion. Dad was averse, which means disinclined, to coming in second place and to not moving quickly enough.

With the test squadron, he wanted to prove that it wasn’t the condition of the aircraft or even the severity of the accident that determined death or survival, but was how securely the pilot was strapped in. To me, his research meant that as long as you were prepared for the worst, it wouldn’t matter how hard you fell.

At first, Dad was trying to figure something out about safety. Somehow, that changed. I think it was when he realized that the tests would only be accurate if they were done on people, not animals. He decided to conduct them on himself, and that’s probably
when he fell in love with moving faster than anyone else ever had. Soon, he was obsessed with breaking the world record.

I’ve seen pieces of video footage from the test runs and one clip shows a leather strap on his wrist coming loose. The grainy film shows the fierce wind whipping his hand back and forth as though there weren’t any bones at all. After that, Dad favored his left hand. I knew his work was dangerous, but I also knew how badly I wanted to think of him as a hero, as someone the world wanted to love. Sometimes, if I thought of him as just my Dad and not as the fastest man alive, it was hard to recall anything heroic or famous about him.

It was lonely living there without Mom. Dad worked long hours, so he was late for dinner most nights. I used to think that 400 miles per hour should have been fast enough to get anyone home on time. Many evenings, he didn’t get back until well after dark. We lived in a red brick house with black awnings and we were happy most of the time, except for when we started to miss Mom. We never talked about how much we missed her, and I learned not to ask when she was coming to live with us.

The only problem is that none of this is true. I mean, some of it really happened, just not to me.

It was the summer I was eighteen. The house on Willow Street was the only place I had ever called home. We lived in a house with gray siding and a dark blue front door, and all of this is true. I was leaving home at the end of August for a college in Vermont and I had started pretending to be someone else.
It was the 1950s instead of 2001 and I lived in New Mexico, not a small county in
Northeast Ohio. In my daydreams, I am Arlene Stapps, not Helen Hamilton. My Mom
isn’t Maureen Hamilton, and she isn’t living on a houseboat in Maine. My Dad isn’t
Richard Hamilton, a divorce lawyer at Buckingham and Welsh, he is Lieutenant Colonel
John Stapps and he is the fastest man alive. Arlene Stapps isn’t leaving home in the fall,
and even if she was, she would have been strong and ready. Her dad invented the
seatbelt, so she knew that someone who loved her was concerned about keeping people
alive and safe.

Some days, I would smoke pot and think about my pretend life for hours. It
wasn’t the same as when a child tries to turn a pretend world into something tangible. I
knew that was impossible. I wasn’t trying to live someone else’s life, I was only thinking
about what it would be like. I wondered about details: what my imaginary Dad and I ate
for dinner, if the imaginary me looked more like her mom or her dad, if the imaginary me
had ever lost anything that mattered. John Stapps wanted to know how the whole world
worked, and he made certain that he would be remembered. Both my imaginary parents
had cared for each other so much that they never had time to learn how to love the right
away. My real parents didn’t love enough, and it took twelve years for them to admit that
not loving someone enough hurt almost as much as no love at all.

In real life, Dad and I ate dinner together a few times a week. Sometimes Brenda
was there and she liked to talk a lot about everything. Listening to her was easier than
listening to the tinny clink of silverware against dinner plates, a sound worse than silence.
I think Dad and Brenda loved each other as much they could, which was exactly as much
as they needed. They were happy, so I knew they loved enough.
Arlene Stapps looked mostly like her mother, but not me. I have some of Mom’s mannerisms, and I’m tall like she is, but otherwise, I’m a female version of Dad. The real me used to have a dog, Bandit. A Jeep ran over him on my twelfth birthday. He was yellow and when he was in the sun his fur looked like flecks of gold paint. I’ve decided that the imaginary me has never dealt with that sort of loss, has never cried that much.

It’s not that I didn’t have friends at home. I did, and the summer after high school was full of parties and bonfires. Most of the get-togethers were just a bunch of people talking, drinking, and laughing, but the end of each party left us all silently aware of what we were leaving behind. Most of us had been friends since childhood, and I guess we were learning how much it could hurt to leave. Right after school let out, Alan and I had decided not to talk about what would happen until it was almost time to go. He was going to college in New Hampshire, which was close enough to Vermont, but wasn’t as close as right down the street.

A lot of us were leaving home in the fall, and I think we worried that we didn’t have any idea what the world meant, or what it expected of us. We never talked about it, but it made me angry that our parents and teachers expected us to act as if getting older and leaving familiar people and places was a natural, easy process.

We were in Liz England’s backyard and Alan and I were sitting on the grass close to the fire. A red swing set was at the edge of the yard, and it seemed strange that a clunky thing like that would always be there, cemented into the ground. The light from the fire covered almost the whole backyard, and I watched the shadowy faces of people I
had known since elementary school move in and out of focus. I was close enough to the flames that my face felt like sunburn, but I was comfortable and didn’t want to move.

“Can’t believe July is almost over,” Alan said.

“Yeah.” I poked a long stick at the fire and watched gray ashes jump, then fall.

We were drunk, and I wondered if Alan had only said that because sometimes it felt good just to talk when you were drunk. We would have to talk soon about what was going to happen, and I knew that was probably what he meant by July being almost over. It was sad to think that this was the last Thursday in July, because it meant August would be here. Summer used to last such a long time, but that was an obvious thing to say, so I just poked at the fire again, pictured John Stapps in a leather pilot’s hat, smiling, his eyes watering as the heavy wind made his cheeks shake.

Joe Simmons sat down on the other side of Alan. I finished my Rolling Rock, thought about getting another. I liked Joe, but never knew what to say to the guy. After his mom ran off when he was four, his dad had burnt down their house and the two of them moved into a red barn on the property. He fixed it up, tried to make it like a house, but I was there once with Kate buying pot and it was drafty, didn’t even look like a place someone should live. After we gave Joe the money, the three of us had gone outside to get high, even though Joe’s dad didn’t care anyway. No one liked being in that house except for Joe’s dad, and he was usually only in there to beat up Joe or to pass out drunk. Everyone felt pretty awful about Joe’s dad kicking him around all the time, but Joe never talked about it, so we didn’t either. Joe had a wide face and he always looked surprised. Maybe he always was, I don’t know.

“I guess it’s the end of summer,” Joe said.
“Not yet,” Alan said.

“Might as well be,” Joe said, and I nodded my head.

Joe was sticking around town, going to the community college in the fall. He was smart enough to get out of here, but he had missed a lot of senior year. His test scores were still decent enough to get him into a better school, but he had waited until the last minute to enroll. Joe probably wanted to get out of here more than anyone else did. I wondered if he would ever leave, then I wondered if he had an imaginary life, too.

He stood up, put his thumbs in his belt loops. “You guys want another drink?” He stared at the fire, waiting for us to answer.

“Yeah, if you’re going that way,” I said.

We were quiet as we watched Joe walk unsteadily toward the cooler on the back porch. He stopped in front of the porch swing and put his arm around Sandy Perkins’s waist as he whispered something into her hair. If sad guys like Joe were always around, beautiful and well-meaning girls like Sandy would always be around to take care of them. And Sandy would probably be here for the rest of her life. She was sweet and hated to see people upset, but rumor was that having sex was the only way she knew how to love, and I think she felt it was the only way to be loved.

“Those two will make it by the end of the night,” Alan said.

“I thought they already had.”

Alan shrugged and took a cigarette from the pack beside him, lit one for both of us. Alan and I could talk about sex without getting embarrassed, but we only talked about other people having sex. We slept together, but never brought it up. Even right after the first time when we were sixteen, I had laid my head against his chest and said, “I liked
“Me too.” That’s probably the most we ever talked about it. I liked having sex with Alan, and I often wondered if there was more we should say about it, but figured if there was something that important to say, one of us would eventually say it.

Joe came back with three beers, shaking his head and grinning. “Sandy,” he said, shaking his head some more.

I opened my beer and flicked the cap in the fire, tried to watch the flames grab it, but it fell between the burning branches. “You like her,” I said.

“I guess.” He looked over his shoulder, and I followed his gaze. Sandy slipped off her sandal and scratched the back of her bare calf with her toe. Her toenails were painted red, and I watched as she brushed strands of blonde hair away from her face. I was jealous of the way she moved, like a ballerina, graceful and deliberate. I narrowed my eyes as Sandy smiled, pressed her hand against Jenny Harking’s plump arm. Joe stood up, walked back toward Sandy like someone was pulling him.

I hadn’t liked Jenny Harking since the tenth grade, when she told the whole softball team that Alan only dated me because he felt sorry for me. I had punched her in the mouth, and I remember trying to knock her front teeth out. I gave her a fat lip instead, and we had ignored each other the rest of high school. I still hated Jenny, and I was struck with the image of her sitting on a rocket-propelled sled, opening her mouth in a toothless scream, crying because she was afraid of everything happening at breakneck speeds.

Alan put his hand on my thigh when Joe walked away. I looked around the backyard, watched as people flirted and made last-minute efforts at finding someone to be with for the rest of summer, or for the rest of the night, even though it would only give
them one more person to miss. Smiling, my hand warm against Alan’s, I took a long hit off my cigarette and blew the smoke into the fire, realized I was happy.

“What are you smiling about?”

“Nothing really,” I said, taking another drink of beer. “I’m happy to be here, I guess.”

“Yeah? Me too,” he said.

The flames in front of us danced, licked at logs and twigs, covered our bare arms in the kind of warmth that made me shiver at first. It was easy to be silent, drunk, and a little stoned, as long as we could stare at the fire and just think about what we would have to say. It made me feel secure and not afraid. My favorite part about a fire was taking a shower in the morning, the smell of burnt wood and ash seeping off my skin and hair.

I stood up and stretched my legs, moved back from the fire and cleared my throat.

“It’s hot.”

Alan stood up and threw his cigarette butt into the fire. I inhaled sharply on mine until it hurt, then ground the butt into the dirt beside the fire pit.

“I guess it’s almost time to go,” he said, drinking his beer.

“Home?”

Alan leaned back, and I heard the bones in his hips crack. I liked the sound. “No,” he said.

I nodded, swallowed and didn’t know if it would be easier to run away as fast as I could, or to lean against Alan, let him support my weight. “Oh.”

I watched Michael James, a kid who had sat behind me in almost every class, walk into the woods with Shannon Royal. They were holding hands and I wanted to run
across the yard with Alan, catch up to them and show them how hard it was for me to let go of someone else’s hand. Instead, Alan and I walked the other way, toward the swing set, dragging our feet through the grass, my sandals slapping against the soles of my feet with each step. Liz’s parents hadn’t mowed the lawn before their vacation, and the long blades of grass tickled my toes, but I didn’t mind.

The swing set had faded to a dull gray over the years. It used to have bright blue and yellow stripes painted on it, but most of the paint had peeled away. I looked at Alan and shrugged my shoulders.

I put my beer at the top of the blue slide and sat on a swing. The chains were rusty, and I could feel bits of metal and rust sticking to the sweat on my palms as I pumped my legs back and forth. Alan sat down, too, smiled at me, his eyes crinkling at the corners. Swinging in the dark, feeling the soft breeze hit my face, I wanted to tell Alan about John Stapps, about the whole imaginary family. We could see the woods from the swing set, and I pointed toward the trees.

“What do you think Michael and Shannon are doing?”

He laughed, and I saw him take a sip of his beer. That was one thing I liked a lot about Alan, he had good balance. I didn’t. I could fall over if I was standing still.

Alan stopped laughing, then pointed his foot at the trees. “Shit. I just remembered that day in the woods.”

I took a deep breath, reached in my pocket for a cigarette and held out my hand for Alan’s lighter. He passed it to me across the swings and I grabbed it without falling.

“What. I haven’t thought about that in years.” I remembered Mr. Edgerly, and I remembered that his socks had been inside-out, but I couldn’t remember what he looked
like when Alan and I had found him dead, hanging from a branch. I put the cigarette to my lips, let it dangle there and burn.

“Neither have I,” Alan said.

We kept swinging, and I jumped off the swing when I thought of kissing Alan by the pond and of Mr. Edgerly hanging from that branch, swaying just a little bit. I landed on my feet, remembered that it wouldn’t hurt if I was ready for anything, then dropped to my knees from the impact. I stared at the ground until my eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness, until I could make out the dirt underneath the grass, until the cigarette smoke made my eyes water, then lied on my back and felt dizzy. Alan got off the swing and stretched out beside me.

“Helen,” he said, holding my wrist in his hand, taking the cigarette from my mouth.

“I know,” I said, closing my eyes. “You want to talk about leaving.”

I heard him take a deep breath and crack his knuckles against his stomach. “I guess we should.”

“Yeah.” I opened my eyes and felt tired, thought I could go to sleep like that, my eyes open, staring at an old swing set in the dark. I rolled over on my side, put my hand on Alan’s chest, and remembered “I liked that.” I waited for him to hit the cigarette, then took it, my thumb brushing against his lips. When the smoke filled my lungs, I coughed into Alan’s chest.

“Here.” I handed him the cigarette. “Nothing will happen to us,” I said. Alan didn’t say anything, and his T-shirt was soft against my ear. “You’ll leave, and I will, and we’ll both be gone from here.”
Alan flicked the cigarette behind him. “What about all this,” he said, waving his arm above his head, pointing at the party, the woods, the swing set.

“All this,” I said, mimicking his movements, “will still be here.”

“We won’t.” Alan coughed. “Be here, I mean. But what about being together?”

I nodded, felt my hair brush against his chin, wondered if it tickled against his skin. “Yes.”

“When,” he said, speaking into my hair.

“Whenever we can.”

“Okay.” He put his arm around me and pulled me closer.

Like everything else, that was probably all we would ever say about that.

Somehow, it was enough. Maybe we didn’t know any better, but I had seen a lot of adults who should know better really mess things up by crying and screaming at each other.

Looking at the people spread across the yard, I saw Joe and Sandy sitting on the porch swing together. She was slouched low in the swing, holding Joe’s head against her chest, his hat was off and she was running her fingers through his hair. Joe’s arm was dangling off the swing, and he pushed against the concrete, moving them slowly back and forth. They were taking care of each other, and that was enough, too.
PART II

SHORTS
Ms. Campbell did not exactly hate the mailman. Hate was a strong word. She told that to her fourth-graders at Jefferson Elementary School at least once a week. Hating the mailman would make her a mean and unstable woman, and that would make her feel like an old woman. She didn’t want to feel old. It was the system she hated. She hated the way it made her feel. She detested her beating heart sometimes, too. She was trying to convey these things, without saying too much, to her fourth grade class on a sleepy Thursday afternoon.

It was almost time for them to go home and everyone seemed to be sitting with their heads cocked, like dogs, so they wouldn’t miss the ringing of the school bell. Ms. Campbell sighed, and for a moment that lasted as long as her sigh, she couldn’t stand the smell of chalk, the dusty feel of it on her skin. She wanted to rip the pages out of the books her children read. The smell of a clean elementary school gymnasium made her stomach turn, and she hated it almost as much as the postal service.

Even Marlene Sturkins, the studious scholar, was restless. Marlene had a different colored pocket protector for every corduroy jumper she wore, and she came to school in a different colored jumper every day. Ms. Campbell wanted to tell Marlene that when she
got older and developed breasts she wouldn’t be able to wear a pocket protector, and she would have to carry ink pens in her pockets, or maybe even a purse. Life would ruin many things for Marlene, and she would find out how the good don’t always win. As she got older, she would notice how most things people say aren’t heard, they’re just said, just words coming out of mouths. Marlene would learn how awful it was to hate something. Ms. Campbell was a teacher, sure, but she didn’t think everything about life, especially the parts about people coming and going, could be taught, at least not to young girls like Marlene Sturkins.

Ms. Campbell wiped her hands on her blue knee-length skirt. “You can go home early,” she said. Go home to a warm snack, to people who will ask about your day, she wanted to say.

“Ms. Campbell,” Jimmy Lemon spoke up from the back row. “Our buses aren’t here yet, we don’t have anywhere to go.”

The kids stared at each other uneasily. They knew that Ms. Campbell hadn’t been the same since winter break. She had let them go early the day the flag outside was at half mast, and they knew what half mast meant—she had taught them.

There had been a day in February, an uncommonly warm day, and Ms. Campbell had said it wasn’t right for them to sit inside on such a beautiful day. On that day, the whole class had followed Mr. Akky around on his mail route for three hours. He hadn’t said swear words around the children, but had called Ms. Campbell other names that weren’t swear words. The kids had known what those words meant, too. There had been tears in Ms. Campbell’s eyes that day as Mr. Akky’s voice had softened when he apologized and said that he didn’t have anything else for her. The first delivery had not
been a mistake, he had said. That uncommonly nice day ended with a surprise snowfall that should have been expected in February anyway.

The whole class came slowly out of the memory. Somehow, Marlene Sturkins had been thinking of the same unfolding of events, of that nice day in February, that Jimmy Lemon had been thinking of, the same day Marcus Parks had been remembering, the same day the twins, Elizabeth and Lisa Lester had been watching in their mind’s eyes, but the twins were always thinking the same thing. Ms. Campbell came back to the sleepy Thursday afternoon with her class and yawned.

“That’s right, we still have fifteen minutes, don’t we?”

The class nodded in agreement.

“You have fifteen minutes of free time until the bell rings. Tomorrow, remember to bring an old sock and a handful of rocks. Don’t forget your comfortable shoes.”

She left the room and stared down the long carpeted hallway, wondering if the door had always been so far away. Ms. Campbell ran down the hallway faster than she thought she could move. She kicked off her brown pumps and held her skirt up above her knees so she could go even faster. Outside, the sun was bright and the pavement was rough through her pantyhose as she ran in her bare feet, stepping on every crack in the sidewalk because good luck and bad luck didn’t matter the way they used to.

She got to her house, one block away from the school, and stared at the two-car garage, remembering how they had said it was something they would use forever. Her hands shook as she opened the mailbox, the plastic kind that was made to look like a miniature house. She rifled through junk mail and bills, stared for a second at the “have you seen me?” postcard and thought a suspected kidnapper looked like Craig Gostlin’s
mother. She didn’t care either way. With a shrill and painful scream, she ripped off the red flap on the mailbox and sat by the side of the road, weeping. The weeds were stiff and they poked her leg through the silky fabric of her pantyhose. Her breath came in gasps and she clutched the broken mailbox flap to her chest, screaming his name.
Adagio

Russell Pronski stood in the middle of his kitchen, the only place to stand in the
closet-sized area. The landlord had called it a galley kitchen when Russell signed the
lease two years ago on the hood of the landlord’s maroon four-door sedan. Russell had
never felt at ease in his galley kitchen. He fingered the groove on his ring finger. The ring
was gone, the skin was smooth, and he was alone again. The wall behind the stove was
brown and shiny with grease.

He thought about his family, the first one: his parents, sisters, his grandmother
and all her stories. That had been a family. He thought of his second family: his ex-wife,
his daughter. The second family had left because they thought he spent too much of his
time being sad. His music, the music he had been playing on the violin for most of his
life, was too mournful, they had said. Russell shrugged his shoulders, a gesture he had
adapted so that he didn’t have to say “I don’t know” anymore. But no one was there to
see it.

The kitchen walls were ocean blue, but the leftover gallon of paint he found in the
closet by the bathroom had “heavenly blue” written on the label, and Russell was okay
with that. He figured that most people liked to think of ocean and sky as being the same
thing, and if you stared long enough at the ocean and the horizon, it wouldn’t be hard to
trick yourself into thinking they were connected.

Anyway, it wasn’t the paint so much that gave him an uneasy feeling, but the
inventive wall decorations put up by the last tenant. Whoever had lived there before him
had glued all shapes and sizes of buttons to the ocean blue, heavenly walls. There was a
mix of regular buttons, like the kind on cardigan sweaters and oxford shirts, and novelty
buttons shaped like various items: a school bus, a telephone, a pair of red rumps, a music note. They reminded Russell of the kind a grade school teacher would sew onto her sweater. The buttons reminded him of suffocation. The landlord had said it was too much trouble to take them down. It didn’t mess anything up, he had said, but he was willing to admit it was a little strange.

Russell licked his lips and took a drink from his glass. If the buttoned-wallpaper walls had been in another, larger kitchen, Russell would have dealt with the theme. It was the “galley kitchen” label that bothered him the most.

Russell’s grandmother, Anna Pronski, used to tell him about her first lover—Russell’s real grandfather, Claude Satchel, a concert pianist, who died in Italy in 1890. Claude had written a lot of mournful songs, too. Claude had spent the last four years of his life in an Italian prison for strangling another musician, Heinrich Satchel, who had also been his cousin. He had strangled Heinrich with Heinrich’s own cello string. They had been fighting about the second movement of Beethoven’s “Archduke” trio and whether or not Beethoven had meant it to be adagio or andante.

Adagio and andante, as Russell always told his grandmother, were almost the same tempo. The difference was mostly in tone, he usually said. Every time Russell had heard the story, his grandmother’s response had always been the same: That’s what your grandfather said, she would say.

The argument about the tempo had turned into a fistfight about who was a better musician and whether or not Heinrich had slept with Russell’s grandmother. Always the first to lose his temper, Heineich had slapped Claude across the face with his bow and jumped on top of Claude’s concert grand piano, saying that even if he hadn’t slept with
Anna, he planned on making her fall in love with him so she would leave Claude. Instinctively, Claude had grabbed the cello by the neck and swung it at Heinrich, knocking him off the piano. After hitting him enough times to loosen the strings, Claude had strangled Heinrich with the thickest one.

Claude had stored the body in the cello case and left it backstage at a concert hall in Rome, where it stayed undetected for one week until concert-goers complained of a smell, which they initially blamed on the musicians. The body had been identified by a scar on Heinrich’s hairline and by his formal coat, which had custom-made buttons from France that were identical to the buttons on Claude’s coat.

In the Italian prison, Claude had occasionally served as a galley slave, spending days at a time rowing with seven other men. Russell’s grandmother said she had been surprised and worried when Claude had sent her a letter telling her about his work as a galley slave. By that time, most other prisons had abolished the use of galley slaves, and she worried the Italian prison and its archaic punishments, would prove to be too trying for the sensitive musician. Claude had said that he didn’t especially like the work, but it was better than being confined to the prison, where he had to sit on his hands to keep them from ripping through the walls to find a piano, or a way to go back in time.

Russell had read all of Claude’s letters—there were one hundred total—at least forty times. Some of them he knew by heart, and he always thought of the one in which Claude talked about Heinrich, who had been like a brother to him when they were boys. He said that if he could do it over again, he would have just agreed with Heinrich that the “Archduke” trio was adagio, not andante, stopping the argument before it could get to the
bad part, which, according to Claude, was not when he killed Heinrich with a cello string, but when Heinrich jumped on his piano and professed his love for Anna.

The part of that letter that always gave Russell pause was when Claude said that if he could go back in time to change his outcome, he would do so only because he didn’t want to be in prison, not because he regretted killing Heinrich. In fact, he said, he still would have killed Heinrich; he simply would have hidden his crime more effectively.

The last letter in the bundle, dated April 14, 1890, was from the warden, informing Anna that Claude had escaped the chains that bound him to the other prisoners and thrown himself overboard while working on the galley. In the letter, the warden said that, although it was against prison policy, the remains would be sent to Anna as soon as they were found. The warden explained that he was a fan of Claude’s piano concertos, and a man like that deserved to be buried at home.

Russell stared at his walls, imaging a ship careening slowly through the buttons, sailing through the heavenly ocean blue, looking for the spot where ocean meets sky. He thought of his grandfather, and he thought of himself, dying alone, a drink in his hand and an empty spot on his ring finger, his body kept company only by buttons super-glued to the walls.
The Winters

“He can’t be a veteran if he died in combat,” Norman Winter said to his wife on Sunday morning. “Ghosts can’t go to the VFW and trade war stories.” He lifted the newspaper back to his face.

Janine Winter ignored her husband and spoke to their daughter, Doris. “He sits in front of the fireplace late at night and stirs the ashes.” She sipped her coffee. “He only has one arm.” She thought Doris, barely eleven, might pity the ghost.

Doris stared at her food, watched egg yolk slide into crisp pieces of bacon. Her father rustled the newspaper, turned to the obituary page, folded it in half, and set it on the table.

“He lost his arm in Vietnam, right before he died,” Janine said.

The kitchen was large and their voices echoed the way they would in a cave. Even the thoughts they kept silent could almost be heard bouncing from wall to wall. It was early still, and the kitchen was bathed in morning sunlight, covered in shadows draped loose and dark over the backs of chairs like old coats.

Norman cupped his chin in his hands and cleared his throat. “Which arm?”

“What?” Janine asked.

“You said he only has one. Which one did he lose?”

“His left one. His name is Ferguson Kennison III.”

Janine’s face was haggard as though she had been up all night crying, and she probably has. She had looked the same for weeks.

“You guys don’t believe me, do you?”
Janine stared into the family room as last night’s tears slid down her cheeks. She wasn’t making a sound, but she also wasn’t making an effort to stop.

Norman put his hand over his wife’s. “Janine,” he whispered, as if he didn’t want anyone to hear him calling out to her. He should have screamed, but he smiled. It was the smile he wore when he didn’t know what else to do.

“God damnit, Norman.” Janine’s mouth was twisted and loose, a drop of saliva hung on her chin. Doris was embarrassed for her and wanted to wipe the saliva. Janine stood up, and her chair scraped against the linoleum, then fell. She looked at the chair, surprised to see it there.

“God damnit,” she said. “I hate this,” she said, and walked out of the kitchen, her bathrobe dragging behind her.

Norman stared at the door, trying to remember something. Doris tried hard not to think about anything at all. She didn’t want her father to speak.

“Your mother is just really tired, Doris.”

Doris stood up, put her mother’s chair back on its legs, and places her hand on her father’s. “She’s been tired for a while, hasn’t she?”

Norman gripped his daughter’s hand. “Yes.”

Doris sat in a tree close to the house and hoped it was not painful for someone to lose their mind. The trees closest to the house are bigger than the ones near the road. Doris liked to sit in the bigger ones, usually in the topmost branches; being up so high makes her feel strong and indifferent at the same time.
She could see her mother inside, sitting at the piano in the family room. The lights were off. Her mother played the piano, and the notes tumbled outside, spilling through the windows in awkward cadences, and Doris cringed as her mother held the sustain pedal. An ugly and high-pitched chord hung stiffly in the air and Doris imagined the wind tossing the music from leaf to leaf, trying to rid itself of the noise.

Her mother had been playing the piano every day for a year, and every day she pounded on the keys with no regard for rhythm or harmony. A lot of the time, she didn’t look at the keys when she played, but not like a practiced pianist who knows the keys by heart. Her mother wanted the keys to surprise her. Doris had been watching her play for almost an hour after breakfast, and her mother had kept her head bent low to the piano the whole time.

The wind picked up and Doris was afraid of falling. She held on tight to a branch, the bark rough and cold against her hand. Across the street, the neighbors raked leaves, laughing as the wind flung the leaves into the air. When Doris turned back to her house, her mother wasn’t there.

Doris climbed down the tree and felt ashamed, not strong anymore but indifferent to her shame. Her mother stood on the ground and watched the neighbors. Doris couldn’t remember her mother ever looking as old as she did then.

“I saw you,” her mother said. “I was inside playing the piano and I saw you sitting in the tree.”

The wind blew a strand of hair in her mother’s mouth and she left it there. Doris tucked the hair behind her mother’s ear.

“I should have come inside. I’m sorry,” Doris said.
She linked her arm through her mother’s and they walked toward the house together. Doris thought their steps were slow and the leaves broke crisply underneath their feet. Janine let Doris steer her toward the house. Doris followed the path of her mother’s eyes and saw a row of birds sitting perfectly still and straight on an electrical wire. By the side door of the house, their dog jumped up when she saw them coming. She ran underfoot and Janine tripped, landing with her face in the dog’s empty water dish. Her dark gray hair spread around her like a mop and Doris thought she looked careless. Doris turned to look at the birds, but the electrical wire was empty. She helped her mother to her feet and they walked inside together.

That night, wrapped in the colors and blankets of autumn, Doris dreamt of Ferguson Kennison III. He sat in front of the fireplace, just as her mother had said, stirring the ashes with his only arm, crying for ghost pains in the other as loud, thin screams unfurled from his mouth. He sang songs about death and Doris wasn’t afraid, even though he sounded like the songs her mother played on the piano. She watched him from the hallway and her bare feet were cold on the hardwood floor. She held her left arm against her body, not because she thought the ghost would take it, but because she wanted to make him feel better. She still wasn’t afraid, but when he turned his head to her, he looked like a yellow and red photograph of her mother. Doris screamed when she saw her mother with the body of a ghost and a fire-colored face.

She sat up in bed, her knees pulled tight against her chest. Someone was coming down the hallway, it sounded like the heavy footsteps of her father.
“What’s the matter? I heard you scream.” His voice sounded thick with sleep and worry.

“I had a dream about Ferguson Kennison III, and when he turned his head he looked like Mom.”

Norman stood beside his daughter and put his hand on her head. “It scares me too.” He sat down next to her, the bed shifting from his weight.

“Dad?”

He looked at her in the dark room.

“Sometimes I think I hate her.” Doris played with her blanket, ashamed to look at her father.

They were silent, the night around them louder than it ever had been. Tree branches waved against each other, and streaks of moonlight scattered over the carpet, forming pools of muted light and darkness.

“Sometimes I hate admitting that I love her,” Norman said.

He walked over to the window and moved the curtains aside. Moonlight rushed in, covering his body like arms, the way his wife used to before she started believing in ghosts. When he turned around, he looked blue in the moonlight.

“She’s out there,” he said, and turned back to the window. He put his hand to the glass and leaned his forehead against it, letting his breath fog the window.

“What’s she doing?” Doris asked. She got out of bed, a blanket wrapped around her body.

“Don’t come,” he said. “Go get the phone.”

“What’s wrong? Is she hurt?”
Norman stood in front of the window, blocking his daughter’s view.

“Yes.” His voice was hoarse. “Very badly. Please, just go get the phone.”

Doris ran downstairs, fell down the last three steps and skinned her knee. She threw the blanket behind her and the cold air strung her face as she pushed the front door open. Upstairs, her father screamed.

Her mother lay in the grass, her left ankle twisted beneath her body, her face in the dog’s water dish. The dog sat beside her making soft whimpering noises, his nose buried between her neck and shoulder.

Norman came outside and stood beside his daughter. He held her against him as the blue and red lights of the ambulance swept over the grass, damp with the first frost of the season.
Mr. Harking, Helen’s basketball coach, walked down the empty school hallway with his daughter, Jennifer. He had one arm around her shoulders, the other around a basketball on his hip. He bent his head and said something to his daughter, and Helen stared at the tops of their heads, watched light reflect off their blonde hair and thought they looked happy like that. Jennifer nodded, then looked at Helen and smiled. Helen wasn’t sure what to do, so she smiled back.

Helen scratched her ankle, then took off her sneaker and scratched the bottom of her foot. She was sticky with sweat from basketball practice, which had been over for twenty minutes. Her mom had said she would be late picking her up, but Helen wondered if she had forgotten. Her dad usually picked her up, but he was at a birthday party for Helen’s uncle. When her dad came to get her, he always came early and watched the end of practice.

She thought about spending the night in the empty middle school, sitting in classrooms, standing in front of chalkboards and wiping chalk dust on her basketball jersey, falling asleep on the sticky mats in the gymnasium. If she wanted, she could watch the sunrise in the courtyard, pretend that she was the first person in the whole world to see the day start. She didn’t think it would be so bad to be alone for that long.

Mr. Harking stopped in front of Helen. Jennifer ducked from underneath her dad’s arm and stared at the floor, brushing something from her jacket.

“Helen? Isn’t your dad coming to pick you up?” Mr. Harking asked.
His voice was loud in the empty school, and Helen imagined his words carrying through the hallways, winding around corners and finding their way back to her.

Mr. Harking smelled like soap and faintly like a campfire. Helen could hear his keys clinking together in his jacket pocket. It was a brown suede jacket; Helen’s dad had worn one almost exactly like it until a few months ago when Helen’s mom had spilled red wine down the back of it. The wine had left a long blurry stain across the jacket.

“No, he’s at a birthday party for my uncle,” Helen said. She looked at the floor, then lifted her eyes and met Jennifer’s. Helen wanted to smile again, but raised her eyebrows instead. She looked away.

“Is someone coming to get you?” Mr. Harking asked.

Helen nodded. “My mom is, but she said she’d be late.”

Mr. Harking looked at his watch. “How late did she say she’d be?”

“An hour,” Helen said.

She wanted to tell Mr. Harking that she knew her mom would be even later than that, she always was. She wanted to say that she wasn’t sure her mom would even remember to come at all. She looked at the clock hanging above the door. It was already 7:30. Helen looked past Mr. Harking and into the parking lot, but it was dark and she could only see spots of lamplight.

Mr. Harking looked at his watch again. “That’s a long time to make you wait,” he said, putting the basketball by his feet. He rested a foot on the basketball.

“I guess,” Helen said. She nudged the ball with the tip of her sneaker and Mr. Harking rolled it toward her. Helen lifted the basketball and tried to palm it, but her hand wasn’t big enough. She held it with both hands and spun it in front of her face.
“Why doesn’t Helen just come with us?” Jennifer asked. She bent down to tie her shoe, then pointed at Helen’s foot. “Your shoe’s untied, Helen.”

Helen looked at her shoe. “I know,” she said.

“I’ll tie it,” Jennifer said.

Helen sat still while Jennifer tied her shoelace, and she liked how it felt to let someone do something for her.

Jennifer stood up and looked at her dad. “Well, can Helen come over?”

“Okay,” Mr. Harking said. “I can’t let her stay here alone, anyway. Is that okay, Helen?”

Helen bit her bottom lip, pulling gently on a piece of skin. “Sure,” she said, and shrugged her shoulders. “I’ll go call my mom and tell her.”

Helen held the payphone between her ear and her shoulder, counting the rings and dribbling the basketball at her hip. It always took five rings for the answering machine to pick up, and Helen knew that only gave someone thirty seconds to answer the phone. Mr. Harking and Jennifer were looking at the trophy case; Helen could see their reflections in the glass, and she thought they looked like a photograph. They would make a nice photograph.

When no one answered the phone, she left a message, hoping that someone, probably her dad, would remember to check the messages.

Mr. Harking opened the door for her. “All set, then?” he asked.

Helen nodded and buttoned her jacket as she followed Mr. Harking and Jennifer outside. She dribbled the basketball in the dark without looking at the ball.

“Here,” Jennifer said. “I’m open.”
Helen pushed the ball to Jennifer, and it bounced once between them. Helen heard the ball slap Jennifer’s palm as she caught it.

“Think I can make it from here?” Jennifer asked.

The basketball hoop was at least a half courts’ distance from them. It would have been hard for anyone to make it, Helen thought.

“I don’t know,” she said. “That’s pretty far.”

Mr. Harking judged the distance. “You’d have to have quite an arm, Jen.” He unlocked the car and put his gym bag in the trunk. “Might as well try, though.”

Jennifer tossed the ball in her hands, and then held it over her head. Helen watched her take a big step toward the hoop, then with a leap, she threw the ball. They watched it sail through the parking lot, and Helen knew she would be jealous if Jennifer made the shot. It hit the edge of the backboard and ricocheted off into the grass behind the basketball court. Helen exhaled, realized she had been holding her breath.

Mr. Harking laughed. “Not bad, Jen. But now you have to go find the ball.”

Jennifer grabbed Helen by the arm, and it surprised Helen so much that she almost spun in a circle and fell. “Come on, Helen, help me find it.”

Helen smiled and felt her cheeks flush with excitement. She matched her stride to Jennifer’s as they ran to find the ball. The breeze was cold on the back of her neck, and it was nice to run through the empty parking lot, smiling in the dark.

The basketball hadn’t rolled far from the backboard, and Helen found it first. It was behind the hoop, lying in the grass, and it was cold when Helen picked it up.

“I’ll shoot from here,” Helen said. She jumped, aiming for where she thought the hoop was. When she heard the swish of the net, she was surprised.
“Nice shot,” Jennifer said.

Helen shook her head. “I couldn’t even see. It was just luck.”

“No way,” Jennifer said. She took Helen’s arm as they walked to the car together.

Mr. Harking’s headlights lit a path in the dark for them, and Helen watched the shadow of the basketball as she dribbled it with her left hand.

She looked at Jennifer, then into the headlights until she saw yellow spots.

“Thank you,” Helen said.

Jennifer stopped by the car. “For what?” she asked.

“For tying my shoe earlier,” Helen said.

Jennifer laughed. “Oh,” she said. “You’re funny, Helen, but you’re welcome.”

Mr. Harking’s car was warm when they got inside. Helen settled into the backseat and rested her head against the window. She was tired, and it was comfortable in the backseat; she could fall asleep, or rest without thinking. As they pulled onto the street, Helen thought briefly of home.
Comfortable

Every Thursday night at five, Mom and I go to the nursing home in Clinton to visit Grandma. Our visits never last longer than two hours, but in the three years Grandma has lived there, we’ve only missed one Thursday every July, and that’s because of the yearly trips to the beach Mom and I take. If you add it up, we have gone to the nursing home for 153 Thursdays, 306 hours total, which is not even thirteen days altogether.

Mattie was eighty when she went to the nursing home. She’s eighty-three now, which means she has been there for 2,628 hours. That’s a hell of lot more time than Mom and I have spent there. She has Alzheimer’s, and sometimes I think it is what happens to everyone when they reach a certain age. It seems that someone can only get so far before they have to start over again.

I’ve always called her Mattie, but I’m not sure why. It’s not even close to her real name, Pauline Esther Lewiston. I know that, at seventeen, I feel too old for it, feel dumb even saying it. Whenever I bend down to kiss her, I can feel my rough cheek on her wrinkly-smooth skin and I think that a man who scrapes his face against a smooth cheek should not be saying something as childish as Mattie, but I worry she wouldn’t know me if I started calling her something else. Even worse, I worry she would forget who she was.

Mattie has a boyfriend, Bart, at the nursing home. Jacquelyn, one of the aides, said the two met during a painting session when Bart knocked over a tray of orange paint that Mattie had been using. When they bent to clean it, Mattie lost her balance, smeared her hand through the paint and grabbed Bart’s leg for support, which caused him to
tumble to the ground. By the time Jacquelyn made it over to their table, they were both on the ground laughing, rubbing paint on the floor, their shoes, their hair. By that time, some of the other residents had joined them. It took almost two weeks, Jacquelyn said, to get the paint out of everyone’s hair. They never bothered with the shoes, and no one at the nursing home seemed to mind.

Some Thursdays, Mattie introduces Mom and me to Bart, tells us he’s her new boyfriend and that she just met him the other day. I feel ineffective after those visits; I want Mattie to remember us, but sometimes she doesn’t know who we are or why we’re there, just that we come often. She said once that it was kind of us to come see her every week, especially since she had never met us before. Mom says it’s common for an Alzheimer’s patient to forget things, for their brain to become muddled, but Mattie doesn’t simply forget things, she makes up a lot of it up as she goes along.

Mattie knows who Bart is some of the days—it just takes her a moment to figure it out. When she remembers him, it’s always the same: he walks into the room, Mattie squints, purses her lips, asks, “Who the hell are you?” Bart scrunches up his face and wiggles his eyebrows a bit, then stands there with his hands in his pockets, waiting for the next part. Mattie smiles, and when she smiles, all the lines on her face move together, settling into the laugh lines she is lucky enough to have given herself. “Oh,” she’ll say, rocking back and forth in her chair. Then she looks at Mom and me, smiles again. “Isn’t he the most beautiful person?”

Almost every Thursday night after our visits, Mom and I go to a truck stop off Highway 62 for pie and coffee. Most nights, Mom isn’t in a hurry to get home, and I
guess I never am either. Some nights, like tonight, are worse; it’s as though we can already hear the quiet emptiness waiting for us at home.

A few weeks ago, Mom had told me how she thought Mattie and Bart were sweet together, how watching them was like watching a movie about two people who keep falling in love with each other. She meant for it to be nice, but the thought of it made me nervous, the thought of being taken aback every day, of being surprised at even your own reactions.

On the way to the diner, I had started wondering about a lot of things: what Dad would have been like at Mattie’s age, what I would be like at Mom’s age, if being in love was like constantly forgetting everything and starting at the beginning.

It was warm out, the beginning of August. Mom was wearing a plaid shirt unbuttoned over a man’s white pocket T-shirt. It was an old shirt of Dad’s, I could tell by the small rip in the pocket from where he used to keep a cigarette pack and his lighter. After Dad left, Mom had made sure everything in the house stayed the same for a while. Everything was exactly as he had left it, his paperback on the arm of the couch, his empty coffee mug on the floor. I liked it, and I had pretended he was outside working on his car, that he would come inside before dark, smelling of engine oil and smoke. I stopped pretending after Mom put his stuff in the attic, but whenever she wore his T-shirts I let the thought of him play in my mind, sometimes even pretending he was at home waiting for us.

I tried to push the thought of him from my mind. Even though I knew no one was at home waiting for us, sometimes it still surprised me and I had to remind myself why we were alone.
“Mom?”

My voice had started sounding like Dad’s, and I knew she could hear it, so I tried to speak softly, hoping she wouldn’t notice.

“What?” she asked, as she pressed her fork into a chunk of apple pie.

“Don’t you think it would be scary to forget everything, like Mattie does, and have to relearn your life as you go along? Because it will keep happening anyway, and it’s not like you would have time to figure everything out.”

I hadn’t meant to say that. I had only wanted to ask if she was tired and wanted to go home.

She raised her eyebrows, then looked at her plate. “I don’t know,” she said. “Probably.”

She crossed her arms and pulled on loose threads hanging from the hole in the pocket of her T-shirt. She had worn Dad’s shirts occasionally when he was here, but had only recently developed the habit of fidgeting with the worn fabric. I thought it weird that his absence had made her develop a new nervous habit, and it was almost as if she had started doing more things to make up for him being gone.

“So you think Mattie is afraid?” she asked.

“Maybe,” I said, blushing as my voice cracked. “Wouldn’t you be?”

She shrugged her shoulders and nodded her head. “I guess I would.”

I drank my coffee and looked out the window through a slit in the blinds. The soft light of dusk had spread a watery orange hue across the highway, and I thought of Mattie and Bart rolling in paint together, comfortable, at least, in their discomfort, knowing that
they had gathered together as best they could anything their memories tried to keep from them.
What it Sounds Like

A man in a black wool winter coat was directing traffic late in the morning. He raised a gloved hand and motioned for the car to proceed, but the blue Lincoln didn’t move. The gloved hand motioned again, this time with impatience.

Carlie sighed with her whole body and looked up at Sam. He didn’t seem to be in a hurry, and neither was she, but she hated to wait.

“Should we cross?”

It’s a funeral procession, Carlie.”

“Is it disrespectful to walk through it?”

“Obviously,” Sam said, staring at the blue Lincoln. He knew he shouldn’t be angry with her, but he was too tired to tread carefully around her. Closing his eyes, he rubbed his fists against his eyelids and stared at the dots of color. He reminded himself not to lose his temper with her, even though he’s not sure she cared. Sometimes she didn’t seem to care about anything and he wondered if she ever felt anything.

The man in the wool coat was motioning furiously for the driver to move. Finally, he walked out from underneath the shelter of the bridge and was helpless as fat raindrops pelted his face. He rapped his knuckles on the window of the Lincoln.

“Maybe he’s dead, too,” Carlie said.

Sam shook his head and tried not to look at her.

“Hey, buddy,” the man in the wool coat yelled at the window. The driver was hunched over the steering wheel, sleeping.

“ Doesn’t sound like he’s talking to his buddy,” Carlie said quietly.
“Man, you’re driving me nuts today,” Sam said, regretting it immediately. He knew it was something he should have thought, but not said. He searched Carlie’s face to see what look she felt like wearing, which smile she would fake.

Carlie opened her eyes at him, feigning hurt. Her face looked like the face of someone who had just missed a train, out of breath and defeated. The failures didn’t matter, though; the next one would be along soon.

Sam pulled his stocking cap lower on his ears and blew into his hands to keep warm. He tried not to think about Carlie, but she was standing right next to him, making him feel like he was standing on very thin ice, the way he had been for years.

The man in the wool coat walked to the passenger side of the Lincoln.

“This is stupid, I’m crossing the street,” Carlie said. She sounded defiant or daring, like she wanted Sam to doubt her.

“Fine, go.” Sam picked at a scab on his knuckle and willed his voice to call her back. He realized, though, that for once, he was happy to watch her walk away. Grimacing, he peeled the scab off his knuckle and flicked it to the ground.

Carlie took a few steps, then turned to Sam. “You’re not coming?”

“No, I’m going to wait damnit.”

“Sam, no one is moving. Come on.”

Through clenched teeth, he repeated himself, but the rain had picked up and she didn’t hear.

“What?” She yelled through the wind. Her voice sounded thick, like her mouth was covered in layers of wool.
Sam leaned his body into the street so his voice will carry easier. “I said I’m going to wait, damnit.” Carlie’s back was turned and she didn’t hear him.

At the same time Carlie moved forward, the blue Lincoln shifted into drive. Carlie had to decide whether to stop or let them hit her. She stopped and the Lincoln drove through a puddle, splashing her with rain water. Droplets of rain clung to her tweed coat in clumps the way dew sticks to the ground on cold mornings. It surprised her that she stopped, and she smiled as the man drove away with the traffic director still in the passenger seat.

Carlie stood for a moment in the street, put her hands up and spun around underneath the rain. Laughing like she wasn’t afraid of anything and never had been, she ran the rest of the way to the sidewalk. Pushing wet hair out of her eyes, she glared at Sam, still on the other side of the street.

He stood motionless and avoided her eyes. Sam rubbed his knuckle across his mouth. He licked his lips, tasting blood.

Carlie took an umbrella out of her bag. “Are you coming now?”

Sam cupped his hand around his ear. Across the street, Carlie forced her umbrella open and struggled to hold it against the wind. She shrugged her shoulders and opened her arm wide in invitation. She didn’t look very inviting.

Sam shook his head, pointed at the funeral procession.

With each mourner that drove by, Sam wondered about the driver and the passengers. He made up stories for them as they drove to the cemetery. He gave each one a different reason to cry, and some he thought might even smile. The late model Taurus was maybe remembering the way the recently deceased used to catch raindrops in an
open palm. The family would smile at the simplicity of the memory and would maybe try it at the cemetery. The family sedan was frowning and fighting off tears as they struggled to remember the last words spoken with the deceased.

From her side of the street, Carlie counted the cars. She reached twenty and stopped counting. Twenty seems like a decent number, but she didn’t know the average. An old Nova drove by and she wondered if the driver canceled a dentist appointment for the funeral, or if they were trying to remember a grocery list. If she could, she would ask if they missed the way things were yesterday, when they weren’t in a slow moving funeral procession. The rain fell steadily and she thought about giving up, but she remembered last night and what it means to smile when you want to turn your head the other way so you can weep.

Both of them watched the last car in line slowly drive by. The driver looked out her window and her eyes met Carlie’s. In a town where people walk with their heads bent low to the ground and avoid the eyes of strangers like it was an oath of honor, it startled Carlie to see a pair of eyes staring at her own.

She mouthed the words “I’m sorry” at the driver, a girl not much older than herself. The girl nodded, driving away with the rest of the mourners. Carlie knew it wasn’t much, but it made her feel useful. Sam crossed the street and stood next to Carlie.

“Sam,” she said as a drop of water fell from her lips.

He looked disillusioned, but Carlie knew he had looked like that before crossing the street and before the funeral procession. He had always looked like that, which meant he had never had any illusions, ever. She thought it endearing, but mostly sad. He never faked anything; it made her jealous and uneasy. He smiled only when he wanted to, not
when people thought he should. When he didn’t feel pain at times he probably should, he wasn’t ashamed.

“What?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to hear what it sounded like.”

Sam looked down at Carlie, moved a wet piece of hair from her cheek. “Are you ready for lunch?”

She nodded and stretched her arm up to shelter him with the umbrella. Without saying a word, he picked her up like a child and held her nestled on his hip. She held the umbrella over them and buried her face in his neck.

“Sometimes,” she said, and her cold lips brushed against his skin, made his hairs stand up. “I pretend you make me stronger but probably you make me weaker and that’s okay.”
Hunter’s Moon

The train tracks ran past at the bottom of the hill and, through the fog and the dark they could see the skeletal steel lines of track slicing the landscape in half. The ground beneath their feet was frozen and Sam pushed a stick into the earth, breaking it into smaller pieces with each push.

He looked into the distance at the tracks, and even from far away he noticed her mouth, straight as the lines of the tracks, her body as cold to the touch as the steel. He wouldn’t touch her that night, something had made him afraid of his own movements. Sam pushed his feet into the dirt and felt the sting of cold in his toes. He nodded his head at the sky.

“They call that a hunter’s moon, you know.”

“Yeah?” Carlie looked up and whispered. “I like the way that sounds.”

“Me too.”

Sam thought it sad how their conversations had become pieces of sound, how syllables came out of their mouths to form sounds and words, but not meanings.

When the train started coming, they raised their voices to be heard over the engine, and when the train derailed, they watched. They thought they could hear men screaming, and Sam heard an airplane in the distance.

They looked at each other and stood up together. The fire was bright, brighter than any hunter’s moon. Sam motioned his body toward the car and waited for Carlie to follow. As she turned away from the accident, Carlie was hit in the face by a flaming piece of debris. He saw it hit her face, heard it slap her skin and he watched the straight
line of her mouth open in pain and surprise. She didn’t say a thing, but clutched her face.
Sam looked at her, then picked up whatever it was that had hit her. He stomped on it and
could still feel the cold stinging his toes as he put out the flames. The bracelet was still
hot as he picked it up and dangled it in front of her face, a lady’s silver bracelet with opal
stones. She smiled crookedly, but her face hurt from the effort. He clasped it on her wrist.
Then her face began to bleed.

The hospital reports said the cut went from the top of her right ear to her upper
lip, but Sam always thought it went from her lip to her ear. At first she was upset about
the scar, but she stopped paying attention to it after a while.

After Carlie got twelve stitches in her face, they walked the quiet corridors of the
hospital, their wet shoes squeaking on the linoleum. The automatic doors opened to let
them out, but they stood aside to make room for a young man carrying an older woman in
his arms. Sam looked at her face and heard her screaming, but thought she looked dead.

When they got home, they saw they ambulance and police car next door.

“Look,” Carlie whispered. They saw the paramedics wheeling a stretcher down
the sidewalk. They wouldn’t have known who it was, but they saw the blue boots Rueben
always wore sticking out of the sheet covering his body.

“Oh,” Sam said.

Sam asked one of the paramedics what happened.

He was shutting the ambulance door but he paused and said, “Suicide. Lot of
people say more suicides happen during the holiday season, but I see them all winter
long.”

Carlie looked at him. “Maybe it was the hunter’s moon.”

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The paramedic looked up at the sky before he shut the door. Carlie twisted the opal bracelet around her wrist as they walked inside together.
PART III

EARLY STORIES

Day for Night

“It’s a good day for a night,” Sophie said to her mother.

“Well, I suppose,” Sophie’s mother said. Margot turned her head in Sophie’s direction when she spoke, but it seemed she was talking to no one in particular—not even to herself.

Margot and Sophie were walking in the snow on a Tuesday. It should have been colder outside, or maybe the two women should have been colder. They were already numb, but not from the January weather. This was a different kind of numb, a different kind of cold that brought a look to the eyes, a vague and bitter terror that hinted at things deeper but showed only at the surface. It was the scared and vulnerable indifference that death can bring to people, but no one had told that to Margot and Sophie.

Six days prior to this walk on a cold Tuesday that should have been colder, Sophie had lost her father and Margot her ex-husband. Margot and Conner (born a Conner died a Connie) had remained relatively close after their divorce fourteen years ago and even after Conner had the operation that turned him into a Connie.

“Mom, what does that even mean? It’s a good day for a night?”
“I’m not sure. But you’re the only one who sounds just like your father when you say it. I don’t think he really knew what it meant.”

“So, maybe we mean the same thing when we say it, only we’re not sure what that is?”

“That sounds very accurate, honey.”

Sophie and Margot kept walking, both thinking silently about loneliness. They didn’t have a destination or even a reason to go anywhere. Their gloved hands were stuffed in their coat pockets, Margot playing with loose change: two dimes, a nickel, and three quarters. Sophie cracked her knuckles repeatedly—fifteen times in a row. In the other pocket she fingered the lime green lighter she had bought at a gas station in Maine. She had quit smoking five years ago and started again five days ago.

“Mom?”

“Yes?”

“Can we turn around?”

Margot lifted her head to see where they were and said, “Yes, of course.”

Both of them knew why Sophie wanted to turn around, but they ignored it. They were only one block away from the old house. In the old house, Conner was a Conner and not a Connie, in a tasteful lavender pantsuit, as he had been in the coffin six days ago. There was no cancer or divorces or new boyfriends in that house. The old house had a family.

On the walk back to Margot’s house, the two women glanced at each other periodically. If given more effort, their glances could have been construed as almost smiles. Neither woman had made the effort to smile or to frown; a smile would have been
a frown and a frown half a smile. So they met in the halfway world between smiles and frowns where sadness has no name, only a face.

“Mom, you’re home.”

Home for Margot was a sprawling Victorian, entirely too large for just one person. Margot liked the emptiness and echoes, said she was used to it. A while ago, she ran into quite a bit of money with some of her paintings. Margot painted abstract dying flowers, shoes (usually women’s), and the occasional landscape; nothing else. The very rich owner of a successful business saw her work at an art show in New York and bought her entire collection on the spot. He has all of it in his own private museum on the top floor of his penthouse. Margot tried a few times to get in touch with him to send her gratitude, but his secretary sent word that he never meets those whose work he likes. Every three months, Margot sends him two new paintings. She doesn’t even know his name.

“What are you doing now? Coming in or going home?” Margot asked.

“Neither. I have work to do at the store. I’ll call you tomorrow, Mom.”

Margot crossed her arms and sighed. “Can you cut my hair again? Not now, but sometime?”

Sophie put her arms around Margot and held her tight, “Sure, Mom. Whenever you want, okay?”

“Sophie,” Margot whispered, her lips pressing against the collar of her daughter’s scratchy wool coat, wet with snow. “I’m just so—”

“Tired?”

“Yes. All of the time.”
“I know, Mom. Me too.”

The two women let go of each other but really they were still holding on tight. When people are stuck in the halfway world of smiles and frowns, they have to hold on tight to whatever is left, no matter how little. The little things that could be smiles, people cling to those, with fingernails dragging and scraping through the hard parts. Even the things that look like frowns, people cling to those, too. Raw emotion, though simple, is too rare to let go unnoticed. You have to hold on for dear life and you can’t ever lose your grip, even if your palms get sweaty.

Margot started walking toward the front door, then stopped and turned to Sophie, “Hey, is it sill a good day for a night?”

All of a sudden, not only the past two hours or past six days caught up with her, but the past thirty years of her life and she shivered, hugged her arms close. “I guess so, why?”

Margot made a feeble attempt at a smile that started out okay but ended up looking like she had just sucked on a whole lemon. “Because, if it is, like you say and like he used to say, ‘a good day for a night,’ I’m going to take a nap.”

Sophie tried to smile too and looked a lot like her mother when she did. “Goodnight, then. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Neither moved from her spot on the cold ground. Mother and daughter stood together and alone, clinging to each other, clinging to the sound of someone else who knew what death and regret could mean.

Sophie reached into her purse and drew out two cigarettes, put one to her lips and offered the other. Margot nodded and walked toward her, hand outstretched, like she was
walking toward some sort of absolution. Sophie put the flame to her own cigarette, drew her breath sharply, and held the smoke in her lungs. She put the lighter to her mother’s cigarette and cupped her hand around the flame. She could see the wrinkles, the age, the sadness. She could map out fifty plus years of pain and sorrow on that face. Sophie extinguished the flame on her lighter and watched the flame die.

She backed her car out of Margot’s driveway and the tires were loud, crunching against snow and gravel, breaking the silence of the afternoon. She headed toward her office, in the back corner of Volume Two, the record store she owns. It wasn’t really a livelihood or even a business venture, more of a hobby. She didn’t need to work, she has more money than she knows what to do with.

When Sophie was born, her grandmother had decided that a baby should have a stock portfolio. She took her idea from a Kurt Vonnegut book, *Sirens of Titan*. In this book, a very rich man is stuck in a hotel room with a Gideon Bible, because all hotel rooms have a Gideon. He started on the first book of the Bible and with each letter, invested in a stock that started with that letter. Just like the very rich man in *Sirens of Titan*, Sophie doesn’t need to work a day in her life. Her grandmother was a practicing atheist and no one in the family knows if she already had a Bible, or if she had to go out and buy one after reading *Sirens of Titan*. Sophie’s dad always swore up and down that she actually locked herself in a hotel room for quite some time, but no one ever believed him.
Sitting at the light at Washington and Center Street, time moves so slowly that Sophie wonders if minutes are passing at all. She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel and hoped she wouldn’t get carsick. She used to when she was younger, mostly in winter weather when the air is frigid and the sun is blinding. It hadn’t happened to her in years, but she still felt nauseous sometimes. She cracked the window and let the air cool her forehead.

She hasn’t been at the light for more than one minute, but thinks it feels like a whole life. Once, when she was ten, her father was preparing a speech he had to give at a banquet, and Sophie had watched him work, mostly because his office smelled of warm leather and old books. She liked that. Her father had to speak for five minutes at the banquet, and Sophie remembered saying that five minutes wasn’t very long at all. He told her to sit there without talking until she thought five minutes had passed. She remembers she sat in his office, trying not to scratch the mosquito bite on her ankle. She had tried counting the seconds in her head, but she thought that was cheating, and she had trouble keeping track of how many minutes she had counted. It had been a summer night, she remembered that, and she had been looking at the back of her dad’s head, bent over his books, and she noticed some gray hairs. She had wondered if he felt old, but hadn’t asked. When she thought it had been five minutes, she had said so, and her father told her it had only been two minutes and forty-five seconds.

Parking in the back of the building, Sophie goes in the back entrance of the building. It is still snowing outside, and she is still not cold. She read once that a chemical reaction occurs when it snows. Something happens in the air that makes it seem not as cold as it should be. She realizes how nice it is to feel something other than regret.
She sits down at the desk and pushes away piles of clutter to make room for the newspaper. She turns a page, sees the obituaries and stares at pages of black ink. Sophie wonders if her father was afraid when he died.

Her father’s obituary was a jumbled mess. The man she knew as her father was contained in parentheses. It had read: “Connie (Conner) Hatano (Marsh).” He had taken the name of his husband following their sudden wedding ceremony on top of Diamondhead in Hawaii.

When her parent’s divorced, Sophie was a child, but the divorce didn’t upset her. Not even after Conner had the sex change when Sophie was older. She had always thought her parents were happy together, not necessarily in love, but happy. Maybe they had been in love at one time, when it was easier for them. She’s not sure how much that matters, though. After two kids and a mediocre marriage, Conner had decided he was gay, then that he would be more comfortable as a woman.

When her father was dying in the hospital, Sophie had sat by his bed and held his soft manicured hand, softer than her own. She had tried to look to him for strength, but his eyes had been full of defeat. If he had been a man still, they probably would have looked the same. Sophie remembered thinking that when she dies, she didn’t want to look like that, she didn’t want to admit defeat.

Margot stood in her attic studio, paintbrush in mouth. “Maybe I should stick to women’s shoes,” she said to the canvas.
She was painting a pair of men’s work boots—a pair of Conner’s old work boots.

“I guess these are women’s shoes,” she said, her lips twisting into a slight smile.

Her painting was interrupted by the phone ringing, or rather, phones. She had them placed all over the house because she always forgot where they were, or where she had carelessly put one of the many cordless phones.

Maybe the machine will get it, she thought as she raced down the attic steps and struggled to remember if she had turned the answering machine on. “Damn,” she said, paintbrush still in mouth, as she spotted a cordless phone on the top of a bookshelf. She put the paintbrush on the shelf and answered the phone.

“Hello?”

“Margot? It’s me, Janice.”

“Hello, Dr. Vanhouten.”

“You missed your appointment this morning. Did you forget to write on your calendar that we changed the time?”

Margot tapped her finger against the phone. “No, I didn’t forget. I went for a walk with my daughter.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yes, everything’s fine.”

“Why didn’t you come?”

Margot was picking at yellow paint underneath her fingernails and trying to remember where her cigarettes were.

“Margot? Are you still there?”
Margot became very quiet and thought that if she was quiet enough, Dr. Vanhouten would blame it on a faulty connection and hang up the phone.

“Margot, I can hear you breathing. I know you’re there.”

“I’m here.”

“Do you need me to call before next week’s appointment to remind you?”

“No. I don’t think I’m coming back.”

“I’m not sure that’s safe.”

“Right. I’ll think about it and call before next week,” Margot said.

“All right,” Dr. Vanouten said, and Margot could hear disappointment in her voice.

She hung up the phone and remembered that she was trying to remember where her cigarettes were. Sometimes living in a big house has its drawbacks, she thought, as she walked through the large rooms, repeating “cigarettes, cigarettes,” to herself so she wouldn’t forget what she was looking for. “Ah,” she said as she spotted the blue pack on top of a half finished jigsaw puzzle. She lit one and put the cigarette pack on the arm of a brown velvet couch.

Remember that, she thought. “Brown velvet couch,” she said as she made her way back up to the attic studio. She repeated the words as she went up the steps.

Her cigarette dangling from her mouth, she started adding more yellow to the creases of the work boots in slow, short strokes. She squinted through the smoke and dabbed her brush in brown paint.

“Brown velvet couch,” she said.
“Mom is, well, Mom,” Sophie said to her sister. Holly lived in South Dakota, away from everyone. Sophie thought if a person wanted to get away, South Dakota seemed a pretty good place to go.

“I can come back up if you want. I mean, do you need me? Mark and the kids will be fine by themselves for a while.”

“No, no. You stay there, I can handle it. It’s not different from any other time.” That’s why you left, she thought. So you didn’t have to deal with this.

“Sophie, do you ever wonder how things could have turned out?”

“Of course.”

“What do you think would have happened?”

Sophie shifted the phone from her right ear to her left and wiped her palms on her jeans. She thought of all the time she had spent making up lives for her mother.

“You mean what could have happened?” she asked.

“Yeah, if everything were different.”

“I still think they would have divorced. And Dad would still be a woman—a dead woman.”

“You’re probably right,” Holly said.

“I still think she would be happy.”

“I wish she were happy now. Without any stipulations.”

“Or antidepressants?”
Sophie could hear but not see Holly’s quiet little laugh. She could even hear her smile. It was one of those smiles that held a tinge of regret, sadness, maybe even pity, and actually a whole slew of things.

“Especially antidepressants. Are you happy?”

“Happy? I’m so happy I could shit pink, Holly.” This time, the smile Sophie heard over the phone was a real smile. She realized she was smiling too, a real smile, for the first time in such a long time.

“Come on, seriously.”

“Seriously, I’m okay. What about you?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I really have to get back to work. Talk to you soon?”

“Yeah, soon. Later, Sophie.”

Sophie hung up the phone and thought about her family. She could see Holly, hanging up her phone in South Dakota. Holly would go back to a real world and Sophie would stay in the one in her head, traveling from that one to the one in Margot’s.

She reached her hand above her head as though she were grabbing for something inches away. She wondered how often Holly thought of Mom and of what she was and wasn’t. Stretching her legs out far in front of her, she wondered if Mom thought about it, too.

With her head raised, she looked up at the only thing hanging in her office, an oil painting from her mother, a recent painting of soft lavender pumps with one broken heel. Sophie thought a lot of things were like that: some parts broken, some parts whole. When her mother had given it to her, Sophie told her she thought the only abstracts she painted
were dying flowers and Margot told her the shoes weren’t an abstract. It is one of the few pieces Margot didn’t sell to the man in New York. “Some things shouldn’t be sold,” she said when she hung it on Sophie’s wall.

* * *

Margot put her hand on the doorknob and found sudden comfort in the cold hard brass. She held the doorknob in the palm of her hand for a moment, long enough to forget why she was going into the garage. It was easier to forget. It hurt to remember.

The garage and the ’78 Plymouth were the beginning of the end for Margot and everyone. Only it hadn’t been the end. It was supposed to be.

She walked down the steps into the garage, squared her shoulders to feel strong. She squinted through the dust at things she had not looked at for years. Margot only remembered what she had for breakfast that day because she had been eating the same thing for eleven years: two poached eggs, three very crisp almost burnt pieces of bacon, and one piece of whole wheat toast.

She couldn’t remember much of anything else. But that day, that one day, she remembered that. Conner at work and the girls at school, she turned on the Plymouth and locked herself in the garage. She went inside a few times, twice for more beer, and once because her pen ran out of ink. She even had to restart the car once. She was almost there, almost gone, when Conner came home early and found her. Later, when he asked her why, she said she didn’t know for sure.

Margot cleaned the dust off a package of new soft-bristle paintbrushes and walked back into the house. She grabbed the doorknob but no longer found it comforting, she wanted warmth. She wanted to forget, to really forget.
Sophie watched her mother over the top of the menu. She was supposed to be deciding between Eggplant Parmesan and Fettuccini Alfredo, but her mother was much more interesting.

Over the years, Margot had developed a habit of talking to herself. She didn’t say any words out loud, just moved her mouth. Sophie was trying to put words to the forms her lips were making. It could have been anything.

“Mom, are you ready to order?”

“Huh? I think so. Are you?”

“Sure.”

“I talked to James Collins today. You know, the head of the men’s choir?”

Margot had actually talked to him yesterday and Sophie had already heard the details of the conversation, but didn’t let on.

“Oh, what did he have to say?”

“They made your father an honorary member of the men’s choir.”

Sophie had smirked the first time she heard this, and she still found it funny.

“Why did he do that?”

“I don’t remember,” Margot said, a guilty look on her face.

Sophie pushed ashes around in the ashtray and said, “Oh well, Mom. Some things aren’t worth remembering.”

Margot looked out the window at the snow falling softly, fresh snow covering up all the footsteps from the forgotten day. Margot wished the snow could cover all the
footsteps, all the past, all the old mistakes. It had been so long since she had made a snow
angel. She wondered how long it had been since Sophie had made one. She looked back
at her daughter and said, “Yes, but some things are.”

Sophie and Margot walked arm in arm back to Sophie’s car, their breath coming
in short puffs, barely visible in the darkness.

“Thanks for dinner, Mom.”

“You’re welcome, honey. Thanks for the company.” Margot patted her daughter’s
arm.

Sophie smiled weakly. “You’re welcome, Mom.”

Sophie raised her head to the streetlight. The snow was sliding through the rays of
light and she wondered when their conversations had started sounding so clinical.

Margot looked, too, and Sophie watched her mother as she got on her knees, one
hand stretched out to steady her, and lay back in the snow. It alarmed Sophie, but she
made no move to stop her.

“Sophie, come look at the stars.”

As she looked at her mother on the ground, her fear passed, and she had never
seen anyone look as beautiful as her mother did then, the snowflakes falling on her
cheeks and eyelashes as she bathed in the beauty and obscurity of the night. She looked
like a child. She looked like a lonely young woman who knew there were worse things
than being alone. She looked exactly like Sophie herself.

Sophie waited to feel something. A spasm of dread or terror, or even a pang of
delight, but felt nothing. As she rested her head on the ground she thought that she would
not mind having to look at the night sky for many more years and she would not mind
never seeing it again. She stared hard, let the snow dizzy her, and had trouble
distinguishing stars from snowflakes. If she looked closely enough at the snow falling in
the streetlight it looked like rain instead of snow.
Flint’s Fire

Tommy November was asleep at the bar. It had not been a good day for the county coroner, but not many were. He had seen two dead ones that day. One was a twin, and he had to stare at the look-a-like living one after assessing the dead one. The other was a recently widowed elderly lady. Tommy had seen her late husband’s body only days ago.

For three and a half years, Tommy November had been county coroner for the small and relatively inactive county of Franker, Texas. For three of those three and a half years, many of his evenings had been spent at Flint’s. His assistant county coroner, Melissa May, had quit two months ago and Tommy was forced to hire a temporary assistant who was really just an intern. Without a real assistant, there was more work for Tommy and he noticed how often people died in the small county. He issued out so many death certificates that sometimes he felt like a doctor handing out lollipops.

Flint, the owner and sole bartender of Flint’s Fire, wasn’t bothered by Tommy because he was a regular, one of only a handful. Tommy was his second best tipper, Father Elias was the best. Father Elias and Tommy November usually drank together, so Flint made out pretty well at the end of those nights. On game nights, he made out especially well, as Father Elias was a devout basketball fan. He used to play semi-pro ball for a team in Texas, but now he sat at the bar and cheered for the Mavericks.

Maryanne was another regular. She was double-jointed and a champion chess player, and drank like one too. She only ordered mixed drinks, specifying exactly how much of what liquor she wanted in there and in what order. If she was drinking before a match, she asked for a specific glass, one and a half ice cubes, and one tablespoon of
crushed ice. After taking her order, Flint was usually pretty sure he would never want to
play a game of chess with her. Maryanne was a slow drinker, and Flint always wondered
how she got as drunk as she did until Tommy let him in on the secret.

Her strategy was twofold: First, Tommy said, she carried a small bottle of
absinthe and an empty mason jar in her shoulder bag. The absinthe couldn’t even be
bought in America, Tommy told Flint, that’s how potent it was. She had picked it up in
Chile when she was there for a chess seminar. She only put a drop or two in her drink and
that was enough. Then, two minutes after the first drink, she went into the bathroom and
Tommy said every time she went, she threw up in the empty mason jar, then drank it
again. Flint told Tommy she didn’t have to do that, he would have given her free drinks if
she was that hard up. But Tommy said she waited only two minutes because it came up
cold and still tasted pretty much the same. Flint thought that was a little like cheating and
wondered if that was why Maryanne was a champion.

The other regular at Flint’s Fire was Matt. He was Flint’s twin brother and most
people called him Match. Their mother always said that was just like their father, to have
a flint and a match, but still no fire. Flint saw how easy it was for his mother to distance
herself when she wouldn’t admit the part she played. When they were younger, the two
brothers were close but it was more of a survival tactic than a fondness for each other.
The only recognizable physical difference between the twins was the bottom part of
Flint’s left ear lobe. Whenever Match said something about it being gone, Flint corrected
him and said it was missing, because they were never able to find it. When they were
seven, the two brothers got in trouble for waking their father from an afternoon nap, but it
was Match who knocked over the lamp that woke him. Flint didn’t take the blame, but
their father never could tell them apart very well, and shoved Flint into the wall instead. Flint hit the wall and landed hard on a piece of the broken lamp. After that, it was easier to tell them apart so their father started distributing the punches equally.

For a bartender’s brother and an alcoholic’s son, Match really couldn’t hold his liquor, but tried often. Their father was also a drinking man, like most of the men in the family. All the women in the family were fairly aloof and seemed pretty sorry or empty. At a young age, Flint noticed that all the women in the family looked old. The girls over eighteen looked thirty, and once they reached thirty, they either died shortly or were as good as dead.

Flint wiped the bar clean and rubbed at a scratch on the counter before he remembered it had been there for years. He glanced at the neon clock on the wall and wondered where Father Elias was.

He didn’t know if it was still raining outside or if he was just listening to the sound of the wet, dripping from the trees and gutters. His father had died in the rain, had a heart attack when he was letting the dog out, and they buried him in the rain. That was Tommy November’s first day on the job and he had issued the death certificate. Father Elias was at the funeral, but Match and Flint told him not to officiate, said their father didn’t need a priest to take him where he was headed.

The day they buried him, Flint and Father Elias walked through the rain together, weaving between tombstones and flowers as they spoke softly. Flint told him how it had rained the day Julia left five years ago and how he didn’t care anymore. He told him how he was strong now, how nothing had made him cry in years. His father, who had lived his whole life almost unlived, was dead to him long ago and even that would not make him
cry. Father Elias cleared his throat and told him he wasn’t sure how strong that made him.

On the way out of the cemetery they saw a gravestone which read: “Thirty-nine loves and eighteen hates. I am glad we are winning again.” Flint wished it was his father’s gravestone because, even though he didn’t know what it meant, he liked how it sounded. Father Elias had been there for the funeral, but had never asked the mourners what it meant because it felt nice in his ears too and he didn’t want a meaning to ruin it. Neither of them had said anything else as they walked out of the cemetery.

Flint was still listening to the wet when Father Elias walked in the door. He was wondering if not being able to find a reason to cry meant he was heroic, since it didn’t make him strong. Maybe later he would ask Father Elias if a person could be heroic without being strong.

“Hey, Flint,” Father Elias said as his stooped shoulders crowded into the doorway, “The game start yet?”

Flint poured a whiskey and Coke for Elias and said, “No, you’ve still got a few minutes.”

“Good.”

Flint watched as Father Elias sat down at the bar and tugged at his collar. He wondered if it meant you were uncomfortable in your profession if you were uncomfortable in the uniform. He shrugged his shoulders and uncapped a Coors for himself. He flicked the cap at the trashcan but missed and he shrugged his shoulders again.

Father Elias pointed at Tommy with his glass. “How long has he been out?”

“Not more than twenty minutes.”
“Maryanne in tonight?”

“She’s in Detroit.”

“Match around?”

“He’s out with some girl. Might be in some time tonight.”

Father Elias nodded and sipped at his drink. His eyes shifted slowly towards the television and Flint walked to the other end of the bar. When it was clear he wouldn’t have to keep up anymore small talk, Father Elias turned the bar stool towards the television to watch the game. If the game was good, his collar would be on the bar by the second quarter and his starch white shirt would be stuck to his shoulder blades, wet with perspiration and anticipation because he had placed a small wager on most games.

Flint nudged Tommy at the other end of the bar. “Hey November, wake up.”

Tommy sat up, set his shoulders into the slouch that he didn’t used to have and rubbed his eyes with his fists. The whites of his eyes weren’t so white and reminded Flint of an umbrella his mother used to have. It was stop sign red and made of a slick vinyl, but she had bought it used and the color was already faded and old by the next day.

Tommy leaned over the bar, close to Flint. The cuffs of his shirt were too long for his arms and they dragged in the ring of water left over from his glass. His faded eyes peered out from beneath heavy lids. “How about a shot of Jameson’s?”

“Why don’t you just have a coffee for now, Tommy?”

Tommy sat back and dabbed at his damp cuff with a napkin. “Yeah, man. Sure.”

Tommy November leaned with his back against the bar and wondered if it was still raining outside, but he couldn’t remember if it actually had rained that day or
yesterday. He turned to Father Elias and felt like a basketball player pivoting his hips toward his opponent. “Did you issue any last rites today?”

“For an older woman, yeah.” He sipped from his glass and swirled the ice in the bottom. “I did the same for her husband when he died a few days ago.”

“I think maybe we saw the same woman,” Tommy said as he tried to square his shoulders and keep his back in a straight line.

The pre-game show started before Father Elias could comment on the peculiarities of their work or the nature of death. Both men were grateful for the reprieve, talking about work was like being at work. Father Elias, at least, had living connections to the world; he was there for births, baptisms, and marriages and they balanced out with the sickness, divorce, and death. He saw the sacrifices people made, and when he saw someone at their lowest point he knew people like Tommy saw them at even lower points. Tommy’s daily work didn’t offer him a glimpse of people at their best. He never witnessed the sacrifices someone made for another person and probably didn’t know that it happened at all.

Tommy blew in his coffee cup and moved it from his right hand to his left. It was hot and he had trouble remembering the last time he had felt and responded to a physical sensation. His right hand moved to unbutton the first button on his shirt and when he felt that it already was, he undid the next one. Glancing over at Father Elias he said, “You have a lot of money riding on this one?”

Father Elias turned his attention to Tommy and smiled slightly, which was one corner of his mouth lifting a little higher than the other. “No, I’m just a spectator for this one.”
The players were announced and the game switched to commercials. Elias had his elbows resting against the bar and Flint thought the three of them looked like a pretty tired lot.

Elias rubbed the muscles in the back of his neck and knew he would not go to the gym tomorrow morning. He worked out four days a week but was not a bulky man. He had a slender frame and a very well-defined waist. When he played semi-pro ball, his coach told him a basketball career would be rough for him because of his waist. Defensive players would watch ball-handlers’ hips to see which direction they were going to head and with Elias’ well-defined waist and the smooth swivel of his hips, it was too easy to tell. He never could master a good fake-out and had too many turnovers for any NBA team to take serious notice.

One day during off-season, he was running through the park when he decided to quit. A humid rain had plastered his shirt to his chest. His lungs hurt from breathing in sticky air and he stood in the doorway of a church to rest. It looked like the church he used to go to with his grandmother when he was younger. He stood there, wiping his wet hands on his running shorts and he felt safe. He knew it wasn’t his calling, he knew he had not been a holy man most of his life, but he knew he believed in something and he knew it had been a long time since he had felt safe. At least, with the priesthood, he never forgot his reasons, even if they weren’t any good.

Father Elias looked at Tommy and wondered if he had always known he would be a county coroner. Elias hoped, if he did, that he never forgot the reasons. At least he looked like a county coroner ought to look, or if there was a look, he defined it. Today, Tommy’s stringy black hair was plastered to his head like someone had drawn it on with
a black ink pen clutched in their fist. It was getting too long in the back so it stuck out and jabbed the stiff collar of his shirt. On a good day Tommy looked pretty much the same, only Elias would say his wispy black hair clung to his head like a beautiful woman had drawn it with a calligraphy pen. He would say the pieces in the back curled softly toward his shirt collar, playfully making him aware that it was time for a haircut. But Tommy November had not had a good day in some time. Father Elias looked over at Flint and knew it had been a while for him, too. He thought about it some more and knew it had been too long since his last good day.

Tommy pulled himself away from the bar and walked towards the door.

“You’re not leaving already?” Flint asked as he waved Tommy’s bill in the air.

“No, I just want to see if it’s still raining.” Tommy opened the door.

He stood outside and leaned his shoulders against the aluminum siding and let the rest of his body jut forward, like it was something he was borrowing from someone and didn’t know exactly what to do with it. The wind was blowing the tree branches, waving them like fingers on a child’s hand and he watched rain drops from leaves fall into puddles.

How many dead would he see tomorrow, he wondered. Death didn’t mean as much to him as it did to most. When he first started as county coroner he didn’t think he would ever get used to it, he thought each one would mean something different. With the first dozen or so, he made a resolution to really start living and he went home each day feeling more alive in ways he had not felt before. Now they were all the same. He didn’t go home feeling more alive, but he didn’t feel dead, or closer to death. He never really thought about the suddenness of death because it didn’t mean anything to him anymore.
He had seen a million pairs of dead eyes and blank stares, but he saw the same thing in living men and women. His face, he knew, had started to wear the same look. The worst part wasn’t that he knew he could die any day, the worst part was that he had stopped caring.

He saw the glowing ember of a cigarette coming towards the bar, but couldn’t see a person through the thick dark. For a moment he thought maybe it was the man coming to claim the borrowed body. The man would scold him and tell him when he had those legs, he stood like a real man and wouldn’t have let his body slump forward like that.

Tommy stood up straight, pretended his legs were as powerful as tree stumps. He knew his body was, in fact, his own as the glowing cigarette moved to the man’s face and lit the outline of his features.

As the man with the cigarette opened his mouth to speak, an ambulance with flashing blue and red lights drove past the bar. The tires were loud as they drove through puddles of rain and the two men followed the path of the ambulance with their eyes, but didn’t turn their bodies.

“The flashing lights and no sirens means there is a dead person in the back,” Tommy said to the stranger.

“Yeah?” he said as he dropped his cigarette to the ground.

Tommy stared at the ground and forced his eyes to focus. He watched the cigarette flame go out when it landed in a puddle. “Yeah.”

The stranger took off his ball cap and rubbed his arm across his forehead. His blond hair was damp and disheveled. His face had a boyish quality that made him look innocent. Without the cap covering his eyes, Tommy saw that the eyes were not as boyish.
and innocent, but they weren’t empty like his own. From his eyes, he could tell the man had been dealt a few blows.

Pulling his eyes away from the road, the man said “Yeah, they didn’t turn on the sirens when they took my wife.”

Tommy felt a tightness in his throat which made it difficult to breathe. “Oh.”

“I don’t like to tell people that,” he said as his hands dug into his pockets to pull out another cigarette.

Tommy thought about telling him that his eyes weren’t empty like all the other pairs of eyes he had seen. He didn’t say anything because then he would have to tell him that maybe he preferred the emptiness to the sadness. He almost told him that his body felt borrowed and not like his own anymore, but he didn’t because then he would have to tell him that when he saw him coming, he thought maybe he was the man to whom the borrowed body belonged.

“Cigarette?”

Tommy nodded and took the cigarette. “Thanks,” he said after the man lit it for him.

“Welcome,” he said with smoke in his mouth.

The cigarette smoke coiled around them, sticking in the damp night air. Tommy was thinking about the feeling of a chilled drink in his hand and longed to hear the sound of ice cubes clinking together. He thought about the stranger’s wife in the back of an ambulance with no sirens on and knew that was a drink no one ever wanted to mix.

“How long ago did you lose your wife?” Tommy asked. He didn’t know that he should be asking, but he did anyway.
The stranger sighed, pushing the breath out of his mouth. “Two months ago.”

They stood there and the silence of the night was still, making them feel lonelier than they were or had been before the conversation started.

The stranger put his cap back on and pushed it down hard on his head. The bill covered his eyes, and the shadow hid almost half his face in darkness. “Funny thing is, she jumped off a cliff and that’s my name. Cliff.”

Tommy raised his eyebrows and wondered if Cliff could even see his attempt at showing sympathy and hoped he could because it was the first sincere thing he had felt in a long time. He curled his toes inside his loafers. The loafers were new, the toes the same ones he had always had, but everything had been feeling different lately.

“At the funeral, I heard her brother say ‘at least his name wasn’t Bullet.’” Cliff spoke slowly, like he hardly knew what he was saying, just that he was saying it.

Tommy let out a quick breath of air and coughed to cover up the small laugh that had escaped his mouth.

Cliff shrugged his shoulders and said “It’s okay, I laughed when I heard it too.”

Tommy nodded and peeled his back away from the aluminum siding. He flicked his cigarette off into the dark and watched as it hit the ground and sent tiny pieces of flaming ash scattering over the wet pavement. Glancing at the door, he raised his eyebrows at Cliff.

“I don’t want to go in quite yet,” Cliff said and scratched his arm. His flannel shirt had the annoying warmth of a shirt that had been slept in for nights. “I didn’t know she was that bad, you know. I mean, before she jumped.”
“Of course.” Tommy saw the faint glint of a wedding band on Cliff’s ring finger and looked away quickly like it was something he wasn’t supposed to have seen. He rolled up his shirt sleeves, his arms felt sticky and hot, like he needed a shower.

Cliff bit his bottom lip and rocked back and forth on his heels. “I thought if I worried enough it would be the same as caring enough.”

Tommy November, county coroner, thought about all the dead people he had seen. He didn’t regret his careless disregard of the deceased, but mostly felt ashamed. He looked at Cliff and pitied him.

A slight breeze disrupted the stillness and made the air smell of smoke, whiskey, sweat, and tears. Cliff started towards the door as Tommy opened it and stood aside to let him in first.

“Thanks,” Cliff said quietly and his voice was barely audible.

Cliff walked past him and thought there was something about the loneliness of the night that makes people think about who they are. Tommy pushed his fingers through his hair and thought about all the different ways there were for a man to fall apart. They stood in the warm yellow light of the bar and both men had a dim and curious feeling of having survived.