ABSTRACT

THE OTHER SHORE: STORIES

by Kelly Goss

This is a collection of short stories set in the Midwest, particularly near, or having to do with, bodies of water. It explores the way that place functions as character, how place reflects mood, and how place allows characters and readers to interact with it in a way that confirms or disrupts the familiar. These characters go to areas of water as a means of escape from familial and romantic relationships, in order to grieve, and to confront their most basic fears and desires. Whether it is Lake Michigan, the Huron or Fox Rivers, a pool, and even a rainstorm, these stories not only describe the geography of a place, but they capture the culture of that place, and how land is deeply connected to relationships, behavior, and the way people cope with the complications of their lives.
THE OTHER SHORE: STORIES

A Thesis

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Advisor ______________________

Reader ______________________

Reader ______________________
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Into the Water

She hears the sound of her father’s voice.

“Shannon, wake up. We’re here.”

She lifts her head up from the pillow just as they’re pulling into the driveway. Branches slap the side of the car as they move through a tunnel of green. When they emerge there is a cabin, and they park on the sandy grass lawn to the side of it, next to a white car. Eva jumps out of her seat next to Shannon even before their father has parked, running inside to turn on the TV. She’s missing her favorite show.

Shannon and her father get out more slowly and stretch their legs. Up here the trees are close together. The ground is covered in ferns and vine plants. Shannon looks at the white siding of the cabin, the tall birch trees, and her dad says, “We made it,” but to her it doesn’t really feel like they have.

Her dad goes inside to say hi to Grandma Celeste and Uncle Austin, but Shannon walks around the side of the cabin to the back, to the lake. The wind hits her as she comes around the shelter of the house. She spreads her arms and her hair blows; her clothes flap around her body. She smells the water. This is what her mother always did first when she came up here—she said hello to the lake. Her mom can’t come up anymore. The divorce made sure of that.

Lake Michigan is choppy, the white tips of waves folding in on themselves. Labor Day weekend is always fun, the last hurrah before school starts, but this time she feels a sense of unease, of dread. Shannon removes her shoes and stands on the top step of the wooden staircase leading to the beach. It’s too windy to go down, the kind of day where towels blow away, where grains of sand pelt your skin and prick like little needles. Shannon doesn’t know what she’s going back to on Monday. She doesn’t understand the divided days, where she’s going to keep her clothes. What if she needs her science book but it’s at her mom’s house? She goes inside and waves to her uncle, who has a towel
around his neck and is wearing a bathing suit. Her grandmother says hello in her craggy voice from the chair by the window. She doesn’t get up so Shannon walks over to her. She gives Grandma Celeste a stiff hug and feels the perfumed, powdery cheek touching her own. She waits until she’s in the bathroom to wipe her face.

On the way back to the living room, Shannon runs her fingers along the wall of the hallway. She realizes that the walls, which had been covered in framed photographs of the family, look bare. Shannon’s mother had made this wall her project one summer, had said it would make the cabin welcoming and familiar. Shannon begins to bite at her fingers, to rip the nails off as she pauses and examines the remaining photos. None of them include her mother.

Eva and Shannon’s cousin, Elise, are watching TV in the living room; she lies down on the carpet in front of the couch and joins them. The show doesn’t interest her so she stares at the boards of the ceiling. She listens to the crash of the lake and sucks her bleeding fingers.

They eat dinner at the big wooden picnic table in the dining room. Uncle Austin has grilled steak and asparagus, which is what Grandma Celeste wanted. They always cater to her. Shannon hates asparagus, and Eva and Elise hate asparagus. Shannon thinks, Eva is eight, Elise is nine, and I’m twelve years old, and I don’t know anyone who likes asparagus. Mom wouldn’t make us eat this. She’d give us green beans with melted butter on them. She’d make sure there was macaroni and cheese in the cabinet. Aunt Rhonda would’ve made us something if she were here. She stayed at home, but when Shannon asks, Elise doesn’t know why.

Uncle Austin talks about work, Grandma Celeste talks about her friends, and Shannon’s dad listens. No one mentions her mom. Shannon is afraid they’ll talk about her and afraid that they won’t.
Grandma Celeste makes the girls sit at the table until they finish what’s on their plates. Shannon can’t swallow the steak; she just keeps chewing it and chewing it, like gum, so she has to wash it down with milk. Eva and Elise can’t do this. They gag.

The adults go outside to smoke and watch the sun set while Shannon sits with Eva and Elise. The dining room is at the back of the house, the lake side, and the sun’s orange rays slice through the windows. The sun is too bright for Eva and Elise—they want Shannon to close the blinds—but she looks into the light. She feels the dulled warmth on her cheeks and a burning in her eyes until she sees black spots. Shannon tells them to just move to the other side of the table.

The plants on the hillside leading to the beach are thick and wiry, rugged. One grows up from under the washed wooden boards of the stairway. At the plant’s top is a full green bulb, little white petals emerging. Shannon picks it off and pulls the bulb apart, petal by petal.

Saturday is not so windy. The lake has calmed down and has a gentle pulse, the waves rolling in to shore in a rhythmic way. The seagulls dive into them for fish. They caw and swoop.

Everyone else is inside playing card games, but Shannon doesn’t want to. She doesn’t know how to play poker and Go Fish is boring, so she’s taken to sitting on the top step of the staircase leading to the beach. Little beetles that she doesn’t see in the lower half of Michigan keep flying into her. They’re brown with turquoise iridescent heads. They fly into Shannon’s body and she swats them away. When they come right back again, she says, “Get the hell away from me!” which is something she heard her mom say to her dad once.

The water is high this year. The tall thick sand grasses have been eroded away by the waves. Their thin, tangled roots look like hair lapped up by the water. There is only a little bit of beach this year, and Uncle Austin has put a ladder from the drop-off down to
the sand. This ladder is for the kids and parents—Grandma Celeste doesn’t go down to the beach anymore. She has to use a cane when she walks, her frail body hunched. Shannon wonders what she does all day sitting in her chair by the window, watching the lake. When they’re all not at the cottage she must get lonely sitting there by herself. Her grandmother must have been the one to take down all the pictures. Shannon is angry and confused about this. Her mother will, after all, still be a part of her life. She doesn’t consider that her grandmother did it to hide yet another reminder of what isn’t there anymore, to prevent more pain for her son.

Spiders build their flossy webs under the banisters of the stairway. They haven’t caught many bugs yet, and Shannon wonders how they survive on so little food. She’s hungry right now but doesn’t want to go inside. She sometimes feels like she’s on display when she walks through the cabin. The adults look at her and tell her to go and play while they drink from short glasses with ice in them. They eye her like they’re afraid she’s going to start crying, like she’s going to scream. Last week she yelled in the entryway of her dad’s new apartment. She stomped and cried when he snapped that she interrupts him just like her. The bottoms of Shannon’s feet hurt from the pounding, and she fell asleep on the tile floor. Dad must’ve told them, she thinks. That’s why they look at me like that.

Sometimes she sees Uncle Austin look at her dad that way, too. Her uncle stares and touches the wedding band on his own finger. Shannon hears him telling Aunt Rhonda on the phone every night that they’re family, that it’s his brother and he has to take his side, but her aunt still doesn’t come up.

There’s a linen cabinet in the hallway by the bedrooms that has a big shoebox of pictures in it. Shannon gets up out of bed when it’s dark and the house is quiet, and takes the shoebox to the room she shares with Eva and Elise. Their breathing is deep and settled, and she watches Eva’s freckled face to make sure she stays sleeping.
On her bed, leaning against the wall, Shannon looks through all the photos under the beam of a flashlight. The box is full and she separates into a pile the ones that are of her mother, the ones that are of her family, the ones that were on the wall. She squints at the faces and bodies and checks the dates on the back. There’s a nightstand next to the bed with a stiff drawer, and she shimmies it open to put the new stack inside.

After everything is put away, the flashlight off, Shannon lies in bed looking at the nightstand. Her whole family, her life, is in one drawer.

The next day they all climb down the ladder to the little patch of beach. Her dad and Uncle Austin bring foldout chairs that they can stretch out on without getting sandy. Eva, Elise and Shannon lie on matching towels that Aunt Rhonda picked out for them. They’re pink, orange, and red. She likes to get the girls all matching things. One time she made them matching beach cover-ups, another time decorated cases for their pencils. Shannon’s disappointed that her aunt didn’t come up. She was looking forward to the surprise this weekend would bring.

They lay in the sun and Shannon gets hot and bored. She wants to go in the water, but when she asks Eva and Elise, they say, “We’re working on our sandcastle.”

“Dad? Wanna swim with me?” His eyes are squinted closed and sweat has begun to form where his hair meets his forehead. Shannon notices there are more gray hairs on her father’s head than there were before.

“Lake Michigan is cold, honey, I’ve gotta get good and hot before I go in.” He doesn’t open his eyes when he says this to her.

She gets up and goes down to the edge of the lake to look for skipping rocks. The cold water laps onto her feet as she walks down the beach. When she finds a flat, circular rock Shannon brushes the rough sand off, fingers the edge. She holds it in between her pointer finger and thumb and flings it sideways against the water. It gets three skips.
Something green lies on the hard sand a couple of steps in front of Shannon. She stops when she gets to it, and looks down at the glass rock. She can tell it’s a good one even before she’s picked it up. The waves have smoothed down the edges, and the glass is no longer shiny, but has a dulled, frosted surface. Her mother used to hunt with her for these rocks on the beach. She told Shannon where they came from, that they were the treasures of the fish and crabs of the lake, but that sometimes they slipped out of their grasp and were pushed to shore where Shannon and her mom found them. When she was nine her dad argued that that was enough, and said they came from people having parties on their boats and throwing the bottles overboard. Shannon came to understand that the glass rocks came from people’s happiness and from their sadness. One evening before the divorce, her mom went out onto the patio with a blue wine bottle in her hand. She gripped it by the neck and yelled as she hurled it into the lake. Shannon watched this from the bedroom window where Eva, Elise and she slept, where the younger ones were still sleeping. The sound of voices through the vents in the floor hadn’t woken them. The next morning when Shannon asked her mom why she’d thrown the bottle into the lake, she’d looked at Shannon and stared before saying, “I was making glass rocks.” Blue glass rocks are the most rare of all.

Shannon carries the glass back to her towel. No one’s looking so she hides it under the corner of the fabric, brushing grains of sand off it before laying the towel down. She wants to bring it home to her mom but is afraid of what her dad might say.

She hears him stirring beside her. “Shannon, you want to go swimming now? I’m ready. Eva? Elise?” They shake their heads, still digging in the damp sand, so Shannon and her dad go in alone. He wades in and when the water is to his waist, dives forward. Shannon runs into the waves the way she’s seen on TV, lifting her knees high and scrunching her face like she’s brave and going to rescue someone.

She goes under and swims, kicking out like a frog. When she opens her eyes, Shannon sees small bits of algae floating in the water. There are no rocks on the bottom of the lake this summer, just perfect ripples of sand where the waves have formed them. They look like stretches of little mountains that continue the whole length of the shore.
The water is cold, and she has to keep moving so she doesn’t get goose bumps. Shannon and her dad dive like they’re dolphins, and then she clings to his back. “Pull me around! Go underwater!”

He does. He swims to the right, out in front of where the cabin overlooks the lake. When they come up for breath he points ahead.

“Look, Shannon. It’s the old tire.”

Her muscles clench and she holds onto her father so that her feet don’t touch the bottom. There, a couple feet in front of them, a dark, circular shape lays on the bottom of the lake. Shannon thinks, I am twelve years old and shouldn’t be scared, but I am. She knows that it’s just a tire, that someone threw it in the lake and that it moves and resurfaces depending on the tides, but there is still a feeling of unknown, of mystery that something could come out of the tire, of the way it might feel on the bottom of her foot.

One of the last nights her family was together, Shannon heard her parents arguing. She heard her mother talk about passion and touch and lacking. She didn’t know what this meant, and now she asks, “Dad, did you love Mom?”

He pulls Shannon off his back, turns so he can face her. Shannon struggles to tread water, pulling her knees up high so she doesn’t touch the tire. At first it looks like he’s going to cry, and this startles Shannon. She didn’t know her dad cried. It’s like he doesn’t even see her. Or like he looks at her but sees someone else. His face changes again, and she feels panic in her chest.

“Did she say something? Did she tell you I didn’t?” Water spits out of his mouth and Shannon doesn’t understand the look in his eye, why he’s suddenly so angry, why he pushed her away.

“No, alright? Jeez!” She lies on her back and kicks hard away from the tire, away from her dad. She knows she’s splashing him in the face. She swims out to deeper parts where she can’t touch and holds her breath underwater so she won’t cry either.
When her dad goes back in to shore and lies down on his chair, she lets the small waves push her in. Shannon pretends she’s body surfing. Before she gets out of the water she pees, creating her own warm spot in the cold lake.

On the beach she sits on her striped towel and feels her dry mouth, her tongue sticking to her teeth. She grabs a Coke out of the cooler and brushes small chips of ice off the surface. After opening the lid, she slurps the liquid until it burns her throat and the fizz makes her cough. She pushes the can down into the sand so it stands upright.

The sun warms her body quickly. She likes the way the rays are warm and the breeze is cool on her skin. Her hair dries clumped together in sections, and Shannon pretends she has dreadlocks. When no one is looking she cocks her head and flashes the peace sign. She wonders what her mom and dad would say. No. She wonders what Mom would say. She wonders what Dad would say. These things are separate now.

As if he can tell she’s thinking about him, her dad gets up off his towel and comes to Shannon. He kneels, his knees in the sand, and says, “I’m not mad at you, honey. And I will always love you. Do you forgive me?” She looks him in the eye awhile and then nods. Shannon feels a great overwhelming love for her dad. He hugs her and then grabs his towel and heads back up to the house, out of the sun, even though his suit is still damp.

She gets up off her towel and walks away from her family to a patch of nice dry sand by the bonfire pit. There are some rocks scattered around, sitting in the valleys of footprints, dry and warm. She lies in the sand here, gathering the rocks around her. The sand is hot and she pushes the grains through her fingers and toes, sprinkles it over her legs and stomach. She puts the rocks on her skin, like they do in massage pictures, and feels a warmth in her that doesn’t have to do with the stones or sand. She wants to slip the rocks under her bathing suit, in between her legs.

Sometimes when everyone is at the beach, Shannon runs up to the cabin and slides one of her grandmother’s old romance books off the shelf in the hall. The covers have pictures of women with clothes falling off them, and bare-chested men who reach for the women. Shannon goes into the bathroom, shuts the door, and lies on the floor. She
flips through the musty pages looking for words like, “breast,” and “naked,” and “ecstasy.” She looks for words like “love.”

The next day is sunny again. The family lies on their small stretch of beach for two hours, and then they go up to the house. Today is the first day of Michigan football season. Shannon’s dad and uncle lie on pillows on the floor in front of the TV and eat peanuts, crackers, and cheese. They wear maize and blue shirts. Grandma Celeste watches from her chair while running her fingers over her permed white hair. Shannon doesn’t want to watch football, and neither do Eva or Elise. They decide to go for a walk down the beach to where the sand dunes are.

“Dad!” Shannon yells to the back of his head, “We’re going down to Mount Molly!” Her mother used to tell the story of how when she and Tom were dating he took her to a sand dune. They climbed to the top and then he proposed. He named the dune after her.

He pauses before waving his hand over his head. Grandma Celeste mutters, “You’ll have to rename that one.”

Shannon hears her. She yanks open the door and half-walks, half-runs to the staircase. She kicks a stray piece of wood so far it reaches the beach and then rushes down the stairs. Eva and Elise don’t follow her immediately and this makes her even madder.

The dunes are a mile away from the cabin. Beach houses stretch along the distance, separated by tall birch, cedar, and oak trees that sway to the push of the lake wind. Sometimes this wind is so strong it creates huge whitecaps in the water. The girls like to get into the lake when it’s like this, to feel the subtle tug of the undertow, to be knocked around by the curling waves. Shannon and Eva’s dad and uncle go in with them. They say they have to protect the girls, that they’re not allowed in without them, but Shannon thinks they like the challenge of the churning, the power they feel when they
push against it. You can fight against waves. You can be as angry as you want and the 
water will take it. It’ll knock you back and still be there in the morning.

Sometimes these storms move against the dunes, bowling water and shifting sand. Not far from the cabin there’s a heaping pile of concrete slabs and rusted pipes mounded up on the beach. A house that fell into Lake Michigan. There’s not much else there now, but Shannon and Eva used to climb among the rubble looking for treasures. Once Shannon found a blue and white chipped tile and a silver spoon, which she hid in an old sock in the musty dresser of her room.

Most of the houses are set back from the beach, a safe distance from the lake. Shannon’s family cabin sits right up above the water, so her grandpa had a huge iron wall put in before he died. When the water’s high and the air is windy, waves crash into it and spray straight up into the air. Though it’s calm today, Shannon always worries about the cabin sinking in. The girls continue walking and Shannon wiggles her toes into the sand as they point to the cottages. One family has a platformed deck right up on the edge of the drop off, and a long staircase that leads straight down to the beach. The wood is yellow, new, and Eva says, “They’re goin’ in for sure.”

About halfway there the beach flattens out. Homes no longer sit up on bluffs, but at the level of the lake. There are no clouds in the sky and the sun comes down on them. Shannon feels the back of her neck and shoulders getting hot, itching with heat, so they decide to go for a swim. They wade in, count to three, and all go underwater at the same time. Shannon runs her fingers along the soft sandy bottom. When she comes up they decide to have a contest to see who can hold their breath the longest. Her mom was a synchronized swimmer and taught Shannon how to breathe—two big deep breaths, one short one. They go under and she opens her eyes, looks at Eva and Elise’s puffed cheeks, at the way their hair floats around their heads. She stays under until she starts to feel dizzy.

The land begins to slope again, rippling up like waves on the land, and Shannon knows they’re getting close. This is the land of the beach nazis. Tire tracks mark the dry sand, running along the stretch of property. The beach nazis are what Shannon’s uncle
calls environmental nuts. They ride up and down this section of beach on four-wheelers, telling people they can’t walk here. They’re only allowed in the water. The nazis are concerned about beach grass and eroding sand. They’re concerned about the dunes falling into the lake the same way the houses did.

Finally the houses cease and it’s just land. The beach grasses and trees cut off, and there is the first dune, Mount TV. A house must’ve been there in the past because debris is scattered across the sand dune, and in the middle, towards the top, is an old television. They don’t climb this dune because of the dirty rubble, the sharp glass and brick they know hides in the sand. They climb the one next to it, the one with clean slopes.

Mount Molly is a steep sand dune, rutted in the middle, with sides that slant gently up and are covered with beach grasses. It’s a tall dune, and they’re going to have to hurry up it so the beach nazis don’t see them. The three of them stand at the bottom and look up and down the beach. When they’re sure it’s clear, they start climbing.

The sand is hot on the bottoms of Shannon’s feet. They push up the mountain and she feels the back of her calves, her thighs burning. The burn feels good so she goes harder, and sweat runs down the side of her forehead.

Three quarters of the way up the sand dune levels out in a plateau before sloping up again. High up on the sides are tall trees, their sandy roots exposed near the edge. Shannon starts up the last small mound at the back of the landing as Eva and Elise come panting up onto the plateau. “The beach nazis can’t see you!” she yells down. “Stay there! I’m going the rest of the way alone.”

Eva frowns at her, is about to shout back, but Shannon turns before she gets the chance.

From the top Shannon can see everything. The lake is bright with color, and behind her is a forest of trees. She’s surrounded by beach grass and sun, and kneels in a patch of warm sand. Eva and Elise have stayed on the plateau and Shannon can’t see
them anymore. She pretends she’s on a deserted island. This dune, this mountain named after her mother, could be her home.

Shannon sees two dune buggies riding by on the beach far below. They pause at the foot of the sand dune and then keep moving. Shannon thinks about the dunes slowly sinking into the water, at the effect she might have on this.

She hears a rustling from the trees on the side of her perch. Shannon realizes how far from the cottage they are, isolated at the top of a mountain. The sounds get louder, and low growling and snapping noises float to her. Suddenly two coyotes, fighting, roll out of the trees. Shannon has never seen a coyote before, but she’s heard their howls in the night. She’s surprised at how much they look like dogs, and is curious about what their fur would feel like. If their teeth weren’t bared they might look beautiful. They’re so wild they frighten and excite her. This is the first time she’s seen a big animal outside of the zoo, in nature. She freezes but they’ve already seen her. Her breathing quickens and their eyes bore into her, their tails between their legs, hair raised. If she can get to the water, they probably won’t come in. But what about Eva and Elise? What if they can’t run as fast? Their teeth look so sharp, able to tear through flesh so easily. She feels every inch of her skin, the hairs prickling on top and the blood and organs underneath. She sees their muscles quivering in their legs. The coyotes start to growl at her, and Shannon can’t think, she can’t move, but then one coyote knocks into the other one and they’ve turned on one another again, snapping and ripping with their teeth. Shannon slips down the hill to the plateau, grabs Eva and Elise, and yells, “Race you to the water!”

They dash down the dune, and Shannon’s knees feel like they’re buckling underneath her, like she could pitch forward, her body moving faster than her legs can take her. She feels as if she is half-flying, that if she were to jump she’d keep going down, but would hover over the sand, not quite touching.

They splash into the water and Shannon looks around at the beach. Nothing has followed them down. She hopes they’re safe now, that the coyotes won’t follow them, but she can’t shake the feeling of their eyes boring into hers, of that immediate and primal fear. She doesn’t say anything about it to Eva and Elise.
As they walk back to the cabin, thick, gray clouds form in the sky. It takes them a long time because Eva and Elise are tired. They don’t talk, they trudge, and Shannon keeps looking behind them. She wishes they would go faster. She still has anxious butterflies in her chest. The wind picks up and by the time they reach the ladder up from the beach, drops of rain have started to fall.

Inside, they’re starting to make dinner. Shannon’s dad asks, “How was your walk?” and Eva says, “We fooled the beach nazis!”

“You made it up the sand dune?”

“We made it up Mount Molly!”

Rain starts to rap against the windows and their dad takes a sip of his drink, grips the back of the chair in front of him. Shannon still hears the coyotes in her head. If she told her dad about them, about what could have happened to her, what would he do?

Grandma Celeste says, “Eva, it’s just a sand dune. Stop calling it that.” Shannon feels her chest get tight and her cheeks get hot. Eva’s face crumples and she looks to her father, confused.

“Mom.” He looks at her.

She says, “Well, Thomas, she’s not a part of this family anymore.”

“Yeah, who made that decision?” Shannon asks. No one has explained what’s happening, why it’s happening, and she wants to yell, “What about me?” She wants to break something. She suddenly feels that if she were to come face to face with another coyote, she could take him. She runs to the back bedroom and yanks open the stiff nightstand drawer, gathering the piles of pictures in her hands.

“Is this what you want?” she yells, running through the cabin.
Outside it’s windy and one of the pictures loosens itself from Shannon’s hands. She lets it blow away across the yard as she runs down the staircase. She trips and stumbles down the ladder and lands in the sand but she still has the pictures. The rain has soaked her hair to her head, her bathing suit to her body.

Shannon runs to the edge of the lake, to the white-capped waves that are hurling against one another, and walks in up to her knees. She holds the pictures above her head as the waves crash into her chest, spray her face. It is now that she lets out a cry, that her salty tears mix with the cold lake. She hurls the pictures to the water and watches as the waves push them under the surface, take them into their curl. Faces begin to blur, paper begins to disintegrate, and in the moment right after Shannon thinks she finally has control of something, of these pictures, she wants them back. She sobs as she reaches for the floating paper, she hears her dad yelling to her from the wooden stairway, and everything seems like too much, too much as the wind blasts her and she struggles to grab the pictures, to hold the smeared faces of her family in her wet and shaking hands.
At the End of the Night

As she’s walking into her apartment, Sheila realizes she’s been thinking far too often about getting a cat. She’s not a cat person. She’d much rather have a dog but the man she rents from won’t allow them. He says they smell, that they’re noisy, but Sheila would much rather have a loud, smelly dog than an animal with attitude. She contemplates a turtle instead.

Sheila has a couch and a TV in her living room. After work she changes into sweatpants and eats dinner at the small circular table near the window. She holds a book in one hand and her fork in the other. She immerses herself in the book. Sheila enjoys doing this every night; she tells herself she is not lonely, that she doesn’t wish there was a man on the other side of the table. She pushes the rice around on her plate, tracks the number of pages she’s read.

After dinner she stands in front of the TV and does leg lunges. Her doctor has told her to strengthen her quad muscles, to hold weights in each hand as she does it. This will help the pain she’s been feeling in her knees. When she phones her mother—who lives in Virginia—her mom says, “How nice.”

Sheila agrees and imagines her muscles getting stronger, bigger, for each step she takes. She watches the impressions her feet leave in the carpet when she moves forward, and tries to land in the same marks every time.

This is how things have been for eight months so when her ex-boyfriend Jack calls and tells her he’s in town and that he’ll be at O’Neill’s at eight o’clock, she goes.

Two years ago, Jack left Sheila to take a job in Austin. He wasn’t close with his family, so they didn’t factor into his decision, and the Windy City, the big city on the lake, wasn’t enough. Sheila knew she wasn’t enough. She wasn’t even a factor. Sheila
was, however, angry. She cut up every picture she had with him in it, and broke a vase he’d given her. They’d dated for a year, and she’d loved him.

It was easy to call him “asshole” in her head, but really, when she thought of Jack, it was just a jumble of memories about the way their bodies fit together, how he held her from behind and put his hands into soapy dishwater with her hands. How he knew he was good-looking, knew that all the women in the bar were smiling at him, how he smiled back, but that it was Sheila’s hand he kept reaching for. It was about the time they were out with friends, drunk, and someone had shoved past her, knocking her to the ground so she hit her head on the concrete. After he’d checked to see that she was okay, he’d moved ahead with the guys, and it felt to Sheila that he forgot she was there.

It’s been so long, Sheila wonders if she’ll still feel that hatred when she looks at Jack. She hasn’t had a steady boyfriend since the breakup, and she blames him. But she’s curious about what he’ll look like, about what will hover in the air between them. She knows her friends would tell her not to go, that seeing him would be a mistake, but Sheila wants the chance to walk that line, to decide whether to make the mistake or not.

She arrives at O’Neill’s early. The only open seats are at the bar; the rest of the tables are packed with sports fans yelling stuff at the television. Baskets of French fries are everywhere. She orders a drink and sips for something to do. Sheila cheers when the rest of the people in the bar cheer; she flaps her arms to get rid of nervous energy. Every time she sees movement near the door she feels her insides jump.

Finally, Jack is in the doorway. He’s wearing jeans and a black t-shirt, hair and shoulders wet from the rain that’s started coming down outside. He has facial hair now; he used to be clean-shaven, but otherwise he looks the same. Jack nods his head when he sees Sheila and heads over.

“What’re you drinking?”

She isn’t surprised he doesn’t say hello. He orders an old fashioned and they sit at the bar on the stools that swivel.

“Why are you in town?” she asks.
“My job in Texas is done,” he says, looking at her. “And I just broke up with someone.”

Sheila counts the beers on tap behind the counter and wonders if this is a good idea. “What was Austin like?” she asks.

“Hot. But it was a nice change from here. There was more continuity. The wind not always blasting in my face.”

Sheila nods and wonders why he’s talking about the weather. Jack always made fun of people who resorted to that.

“Are you still working at that marketing firm?” he asks.

“Yeah. Still not my favorite but I’m playing it safe with the way the economy’s been.”

Sheila knows this is a slight jab at his recent unemployment, at the fact that two years ago he just up and left. She doesn’t feel bad about saying it.

They sit looking at one another, trying not to look at one another, and Sheila remembers a vivid dream she had towards the end of their relationship. She and Jack were divvying up cookies into boxes, and she wanted to touch him, but he was just out of reach and then he was gone, leaving the cookies behind on the counter.

“Have you dated anyone since me?” Jack asks. Sheila understands that it’s the way he phrased this and not the question itself that’s cocky, that of course he’s still the same guy.

“A couple of people, but nothing stuck. It must be because you’re such a tough act to follow, Jack.”

He smiles and shows his teeth, and they keep ordering drinks to fill the gaps they don’t want to talk about. Outside, the rain pours down, and though they can’t hear it over the noise in the bar, Sheila watches the gray streaks of droplets in the air, the explosions they make as they bounce off the tops of cars.
When she turns back, Jack is staring at the television, at the movement of players across the screen. She decides to whisper in his ear, and she can tell by the way his tongue slides behind his lower lip that this gets to him. She smells the rain that’s dried on his skin and in his hair.

Sheila looks at Jack in the mirror over the bar. He strokes his beard, his fingers always returning to the same spot. When he puts his hand down Sheila sees a little bald spot where hair doesn’t grow. His fingers keep going back, he looks at himself in the mirror, and something about the self-conscious action strikes Sheila as both pitiful and endearing.

The night has grown dark. Jack touches Sheila’s arm and the tables around them erupt. Glasses clink; hands are in the air; bodies jostle. At first she thinks they are hollering because Jack has made a move on her, because after all this time, in spite of everything, she’s tingling. Their knees touch and Sheila can feel the heat of his skin through her jeans, through his. She realizes how high up the bar stools are, how she and Jack are isolated there together above the ground. The other people in the bar have groups. They have partners and friends and families. She and Jack, they’re floating all alone.

When he kisses her she can tell by feel that he has the smug look on his face, that he got her, but she can also feel the push, that he wants her, too. She takes the chance.

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Inside his hotel they pull one another up the back staircase, pushing clothes off and knocking into the wall. He pulls her hair back, exposing her neck and puts his mouth there. This is not something he used to do with her.

In bed, on top, Sheila strokes Jack’s face and says, “I hate your beard.” She wants to make him miserable for what he did. She hates him, but she also feels panic. She wants to grab hold of him and make him love her.
Jack draws his legs up her calves. “I always hated how your legs got clammy. You’re doing it right now.”

Sheila scowls. Her knees hurt. She and Jack bite and scratch and tunnel into one another. Their bodies are so slippery with sweat they slide right out of one another’s grasping hands.

Afterwards, their bodies slick and separated, they lie on their backs heaving. Sheila hears the sounds of the night—cars rushing by on the wet street, a siren in the distance. She wonders where those feelings of love for the person next to her went. She silently begs him not to move.

“I lied before when I said I just broke up with someone.” His voice appears in the air the same way the soft glow of a candle does. “She broke up with me.”

He turns to look at her. Jack’s eyes are familiar to her, even in the dark.

He says, “Do you want to stay?”

Sheila thinks about her small table, about her flowered sheets and the plants on the windowsill. About a pet turtle.

“Are you going to leave?” she asks. The rain taps on the window, the air suddenly feels brisk, and her voice extends all the way into the corners of the room.
The Pool

It was my morning to open the pool. The neighborhood was quiet and bright, the pastel colored siding of the condominiums glowing in the sunlight. The water shone and glistened, reflecting up onto the windows of the condos on the other side of the black iron fence. The blinds of the yellow condo in the center of the row facing the pool were closed. They were always closed, even on sunny days, but I always found myself looking.

I squatted at the edge of the deep end, and as I heaved the square blue and red vacuum out of the water, I wondered what was going on inside the yellow condo. I wondered who was inside. The plastic wheels of the vacuum scraped loudly on the cement as I dragged the machine to the hose. Maybe Danny and Keira weren’t there. Maybe they were just around the corner at their mom’s. Maybe he wasn’t even there.

Frank had moved into the yellow condo the previous summer. I’d watched him carry his few belongings, cardboard boxes, couch, and bed frame through that doorway and make a new home. He’d carried grocery bags of applesauce, spaghetti, and fish sticks in an attempt to make it good, to make it justifiable. His two kids hadn’t even seemed to flinch as they rode their elementary school bikes back and forth between their mom’s condo and their dad’s. I’d felt bad for what was happening to their family, but thought that it was probably for good reason. While my parents hadn’t gotten divorced, they probably should have. No one spoke to one another in my house. Even when I was little, I’d felt isolated.

I took out the filter bag from the inside of the vacuum and pulled at clumps of hair, leaves, and a goggle strap. The bag was stiff and had an ashen, dusty residue on it. When I hosed it down, the water splashed onto my legs and ran white into the drain.

I pulled off my terrycloth cover-up as I heard the regular Wednesday morning crew of women walk up the pool deck. I liked to watch their water aerobics class, but mostly I loved the music that came along with it. They moved in rhythm to the Eighties beats, and I watched the pull of their legs underwater, currents swirling around their wrinkled bodies.
As I climbed onto the lifeguard stand, I heard the whine of a screen door and looked up to see Frank leaving his condo. He walked with his head down, sauntering with a bow-footed bounce. His brown curly hair was wet, and he smiled and lifted his tanned arm to wave at me as he passed. Danny and Keira, his son and daughter, were not with him.

They made me laugh. That is how I was first attracted to them. Their loud, splashing, screaming, giggling play of Marco Polo, dive games, squirt gun fights, and gutter ball made me feel light, and when he smiled at me, I felt I was somehow, for an instant, a part of their bond. The three of them, Frank, Danny, and Keira, were the happiest people I had ever seen. Their smiles spread across the surface of the water and overflowed the gutter of the pool, splashing up in their momentum to reach me. When it touched me I smiled too, and their eyes found me, and I fell into the welling hurricane of their laughter.

I had seen Danny and Keira’s mom one time the previous year. She’d sat under an umbrella, strong tanned legs crossed in green khaki shorts, wearing Teva athletic sandals. Her face was hidden by a sports cap, pony tail pulled through the back, and I’d liked the casual but conscious way she dressed. I remembered thinking I wanted to look like her when I was someday a mother. She sat bent, filling out an endless succession of paperwork, occasionally looking up to her kids in the pool. When Frank had arrived to pick them up she’d handed him the large envelopes, knelt to kiss her children, and then walked out in small but quick steps. I thought her name was Jennifer. She came to the pool more often the second summer, sometimes with Danny and Keira and sometimes without. Every time she came she swam laps. Jennifer was young, had long brown hair, and had a small but athletic body. When she walked past me I couldn’t help but notice a tattoo on her back left hip: a heart and the initials “frd” in lowercase. I could tell she felt me looking at it, but she made no move to cover it with her swimsuit and instead slid into the pool. She swam fast, hard strokes, and while she paused for breath, chest heaving, her
diamond stud earrings flashed in the sunlight. When she finished she treaded over to the shallow end and sat on the steps a moment to rest. She looked down into the water and then watched the other people in the pool. There were goggle marks around her tired eyes. Her hair was tied with her daughter’s pink fuzzy hair binder and when she left the pool dripping wet to walk home, she wrapped herself in a worn My Little Pony towel.

Life-guarding wasn’t the best paid summer job for a college student, but when the opportunity had come up and meant I didn’t have to go home for the summer, I took it. They offered the position to me again for a second summer. At the pool, I was part of a community the same way I was on campus during the school year. The members knew me. We waved to one another when they walked up from the locker rooms, and some stopped to chat with me.

There was also something freeing and peaceful about the work before anyone arrived. I coiled up the pool vacuum cord while the sun warmed my bare feet and shoulders. The neighborhood was quiet that morning before the pool opened, and I looked at the rolling green of the expansive communal backyard across the fence as the blue cord slapped the cement. I glanced at Frank’s condo and wondered if he ever watched me from behind the blinds.

As I unlocked all of the white plastic lounge chairs from the fence, I heard a car door slam and saw Frank’s smiling face appear on the other side of the iron railing. I was conscious that I was wearing nothing but a red bikini, white rescue cross on my chest. “Hey,” he called, coming closer. There was an army green rucksack on his shoulder. “Need any help?”

“No, thanks, I’m just about done. Are you guys coming over to swim today?” I reached up and grabbed the bars of the fence. I looked into his tan face. He had small wrinkles lining his forehead.
“We should be. Keira wants to practice some dives. She’s on the dive team for the club this summer, and Danny’s doing swimming.” He smiled while talking, his lips curved up around his teeth. “Any chance for them to be in the pool, they’ll take. And they love you,” he added, the shine of the water reflecting in his eyes. He pulled his hand up to shade his face. “So I’m sure we’ll be coming by—it’s hard to keep us away!” I looked down and my cheeks flushed at the sound of giggling and sandals flapping on the sidewalk.

I saw Keira first. She was wearing a flowered sundress and beamed when she saw her dad, her smiling eyes magnified by her small round glasses. Danny bounced a tennis ball and pitched it to Frank. Jennifer stopped walking when she saw us. I flicked a piece of paint off the fence before I removed my arms, and she gestured goodbye to Danny and Keira before quickly turning back. Frank moved towards his home as the kids waved to me, and he called, “See you later!” The door clicked shut behind them and I wondered what it was they did and talked about on the other side.

The sun was finally low enough in the sky that the clubhouse shaded almost the entire pool. The surrounding trees swayed in the gentle evening air, and there were only a few people on deck and in the water—my favorite evening regulars. Mrs. Kochar, a squat, pudgy Indian woman, swam in the farthest lane, the only one still in reach of the sun. I watched her as she swam slowly on her side, yellow kick board underarm, and puffing in exertion. Her husband, Devin, drew a chair into the sun and reclined while reading a magazine. He’d dropped last week’s issue of *The New Yorker* on the stand as he passed me, saying, “Claire, I marked a good article I want you to read.” I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye and smiled at his large, round stomach with its outie belly button and his long gray beard and ponytail. When he swam he used a mask and breathing tube and tied both his beard and ponytail into a bun.

Devin was a gem among the frequent screaming kids, grouchy mothers, and callous grandparents. He called me his literature buddy. We talked about books we’d read
and articles from *The New Yorker*, and he sometimes told me of the English boarding school he’d attended in India.

Frank, Danny, and Keira played Marco Polo in the shallow end by me. Frank called “Marco” and moved slowly around the pool, arms held in front of him. Danny darted as near to him as he could, grinning from the thrill of it. Keira yelled “pole!” when he came near the metal railing leading down the steps into the water, and he narrowly avoided hitting it. I studied his tanned body. He had a large tattoo on his back of the cartoon monster from *Where the Wild Things Are*, and another, smaller, on his ankle. Frank ended up tagging Keira. She gave him a pouty face, so he picked her up and threw her in the water. She emerged giggling, and he turned to me, beaming. I could see the green in his eyes.

After they left, Frank walked back out of his home with a black and white mutt of a dog. Danny and Keira named him Double Stuff, like the Oreo cookie, and called him Dubs for short. He had gotten fat.

Frank walked to the fence and I peered over at him from my chair.

“Do you want anything to eat? I just went shopping and we’ve got a lot of good food in the house!” he called. He put a hand onto the fence while the dog sniffed around, and it was then that I noticed he still had a gold band around his finger.

Out of habitual politeness I almost said, no thanks, but then stopped myself. I yelled back to him, “I’ve been on shift for seven hours straight. Food sounds great.”

My stomach turned at the way he smiled. “Want to pick something out? We’ve got a whole cupboard full of stuff.”

I looked around. No one was at the pool. I thought I should be able to sneak away for five minutes. I went through the gate and around the sidewalk to the yellow condo where he stood waiting with the door open.

The inside was both what I expected and not. He had a framed picture of the Michigan football stadium above a leather couch, and artwork made by Danny and Keira
filled the rest of the wall space. A pink sweatshirt hung on the corner of the banister leading upstairs.

The kitchen was small but clean, the cabinets a faded yellow. The cupboard was next to the refrigerator and Frank opened it wide, looked at me, and said, “You can have whatever you like.”

I stood looking into the shelves, and felt the heat of his body behind me. He pressed against me, lightly, but I felt him, hard, against my back. I was wearing my bathing suit and a sweatshirt, no pants. I chose a granola bar, an apple, and a small package of cookies. I was nervous and excited, as if the kitchen and its air was compressing around us. He put his hand on my hip, his breath hot on my neck, and I reached back and touched above his knee, slid my fingers up.

Just then Danny and Keira bounded down the stairs, and I moved towards the door. They asked if I wanted to play hide and seek with them, but I told them I needed to get back to the pool.

“I’ll see you guys tomorrow—thanks for the food!”

The water was still. The locker rooms were empty. There was still no one there. I took my food into the lifeguard shack and sat down. My legs felt shaky. What if something more had happened? What if Danny and Keira had seen?

I remembered the light catching his ring. I felt a loneliness, concealed by the daytime crowds of patrons, seeping in. I wondered what I wanted to happen.

The sky was a mess of misty gray clouds. I welcomed days like that because almost no one came to the pool and the other lifeguard and I could lounge in the lifeguard shack and read or sleep. They always seemed to schedule two lifeguards on the days we didn’t need both, whereas most other days I worked by myself. Muriel and I snacked on
some pretzels when we heard a car door slam and saw Frank carrying cases of diet Coke to his condo.

“Is that man as attractive to you as he is to me?” Muriel asked before turning to me. “I know he’s in his thirties, but God is he cute.”

Frank didn’t notice us inside the shack so I watched him pull his mail from the box next to his door. “I know what you mean,” I said as Muriel lifted her body off the chair, craning and twisting to watch him step over the threshold and inside. “Especially with that earring he wears.” I tried to see through the glass pane at the top of his door, but his figure had disappeared into the darkness of the condo.

“The earring is hot! Guess what I heard, though?” Her eyes were bright and a little unsettling as she squirmed back down into her chair. “He cheated on his wife six times before they got divorced— with different women!”

“Really?” Could that be true? The pool sat right in the center of a neighborhood small enough for people to know one another, for gossip to travel. I thought of the way he smiled at me, how the other day he had told me that I would always be beautiful. Danny walked with the same bounce as Frank, and Keira clung to him in adoration. I thought of Jennifer and wondered who the other women were. I wondered where I fell into this family’s life, where I wanted to fall into their lives. I closed my eyes, and the image that flashed there was one of Frank, Danny and Keira, all falling forward in one simultaneous bowing dive.

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Frank got a new girlfriend. When he had first brought her to the pool, I assumed that she was his sister. She wore a blue and white tankini suit over her curving body and her long blond hair was pulled back in a low ponytail. Danny and Keira were not there. Frank had attempted to tidy her freestyle stroke by demonstration, though I saw nothing wrong with it—it was just as good as his. They’d swum in separate lanes, did not touch, and laid their towels inches apart. Even walking together outside of the iron, pointed
fence, they had not held hands. She’d left his home after a week, carrying her small navy duffel bag to the car. It was when she started coming back a couple weeks later that I realized she was not his sibling. They started traveling in the same car, and began going on runs together with Frank’s dog. She acquired her own key to the yellow condo and came over to let the dog out when Frank wasn’t there. Still, I did not see them touch and wondered if they were aware that the neighborhood was watching. Frank started including her when he came to the pool with Danny and Keira. When she was with them, they didn’t linger in the water, didn’t linger with me. At first she had been timid and awkward with the kids. She was quiet with Danny because she didn’t know how to play his games, and eight-year old Keira tried to include her by picking her to be on the team. Slowly though, she learned the best way to throw a Nerf ball to get it in the gutter, and when the others yelled “Marco,” she whispered “polo.”

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I caught glimpses of Jennifer around the neighborhood, and when she was not swimming laps at the pool she was in some other form of fierce exercise. She rollerbladed, legs taking wide, sweeping strokes, and biked up steep hills with her body hunched over and eyes focused deliberately ahead. She moved with a fierceness, a powerful drive that I had not witnessed before. When she walked Danny and Keira to their dad’s house, she stopped and said goodbye to them from around the corner.

I hadn’t had many relationships, but I knew what I wanted. I wanted more than the antics of college boys, their need to be the center of attention and getting hammered every weekend, their sloppy kisses. I wanted what we hadn’t had in my family: laughter, talking, a sense of camaraderie, of connection and closeness that holds.

I tried to stop, but the way I felt when Frank smiled at me didn’t change. I couldn’t forget his body behind mine.

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“Would you mind watching the kids for a little bit? I’ve gotta go run an errand. I’ll be back soon.”

Slow gray clouds moved across the sky and the pool was empty except for two older men swimming laps. The faint beat of music drifted out the windows of a condo across the parking lot with its numbered spaces.

“Sure,” I said to Frank. “That’s what I’m here for.” While this wasn’t exactly true, I could have spent all day with Danny and Keira. And I wanted to please Frank. He rubbed his wet hair with a plain blue towel, tilting his head sideways.

“Thanks. Especially keep an eye on Keira; she’s a good swimmer, but when she’s in the deep end…”

“Got it.” I climbed down off the stand as he sauntered away down the ramp and grabbed the pH and chlorine tester from the lifeguard shack. I joined Danny and Keira in the deep end where they were diving for rings.

“Hey,” I said to them as I sat down on the edge of the pool. Keira smiled shyly at me. I put my feet on top of the gutter and water lapped over them. “Do you guys want to help me? I have to test the water and I need someone to swim down to the bottom with these tubes.”

“I will,” Danny volunteered. I handed him the tubes and he turned downward, his feet disappearing into the water with a quick splash.

“Keira, do you know who your third grade teacher is yet?”

She looked up at me from the water, her goggles perched atop her head, her blond hair bunched around them. “We just got the letter in the mail. I have Mr. Leidy.”

“Mr. Leidy! He sounds like a great teacher. You know Jensen who comes to the pool? He had him and said he was so funny.” She grinned so I could see that one of her front teeth was growing in crooked, then she grabbed the side of the gutter, bouncing.
Danny emerged, his wavy sun bleached hair slicked back and handed me the test tubes. “What do you do with it?” he asked me as I capped them.

“Do you wanna see? I’ll show you.”

By then the two men who were swimming were dried off and lying in their chairs. One was reading; the other’s head tilted sideways and was sleeping with his mouth ajar. Danny and Keira hopped out of the pool and followed me towards the shack. Their watery feet slapped the cement deck.

“Have you ever been in here?” We stepped into the small room strewn with inner tubes, towels, lost sandals, and goggles. They shook their heads and I set the tubes on the wood counter against the wall. “Not many people get to come in here.”

They stood close to me as I showed them the chemicals I added to the water to test that it was safe. The tubes turned pink and orange and I let them record the numbers we read on the side. It felt right to have Danny and Keira next to me, for them to be a part of that. As we walked back out, Danny eyed something under the table.

“Hey! Can we play with that?” It was a huge orca whale blow-up toy.

“Sure. Someone forgot it here last week.”

“Who could forget this?” Danny laughed. He tossed it into the water and Keira flung herself after it, giggling as she slipped off the side and into the water. Danny jumped and managed to land on the whale. It wobbled back and forth and his yells of delight were muffled by water as it rolled over. I sat back on the stand and watched them, laughing. Keira continued giggling wildly, and I didn’t see Frank walk onto the deck until she yelled, “Daddy!”

He came over to me, smiling, a daisy in his hand. “I appreciate you watching them,” he said, handing me the flower. He leaned close, blocking my view of the pool, and whispered, “Don’t tell, I picked it from that woman’s garden.” His breath brushed against my ear as he pointed across the street. He put his hand on my thigh. A jolt went up my leg and I touched his arm, reciprocating.
Frank watched as Danny and Keira showed him the whale and all the tricks they could do with it, diving under and sliding over. I smelled the daisy and watched him clap.

I felt the sweat forming on my shins, and as I bent down to wipe it off, I saw it sparkling like tiny jewels sticking to my skin. The sun was slanting right onto me in the five o’clock hour, bright in my eyes. It was the last week the pool would be open that year, and I looked to the yellow condo across the fence. As if hearing my thoughts, Frank opened his door and looked at me, Danny and Keira racing past him and around the fence to the locker room entrance. He stood framed in the door for a moment in his swim trunks, a plastic bag in his hand. I hadn’t seen the girlfriend in two weeks.

“I brought you some food,” Frank said, as Danny and Keira threw their towels on the ground and ran towards the deep end. Danny tripped on the cement.

“No running, Danny!” I yelled before turning back to Frank, smiling.

“You’ve been out here awhile and I thought you’d be hungry.”

“That sounds wonderful. The sun really does drain it out of me.”

“Here,” he said, “let’s put it away. There’s something I want to tell you.” He moved towards the lifeguard shack, and I took a quick scan of the pool before following him.

Inside, he put the food on the table and turned. “Claire.” His green eyes glowed against the tan of his skin, and he took a step towards me. He smelled of Banana Boat sunscreen. “I wanted to tell you how great you’ve been all summer. Danny and Keira just love you. At dinner last night they talked about how you let them shoot you with squirt guns.” I stood in front of him in my swimsuit, and I felt the pull of our sunned, bare skin.

“They think you’re wonderful.” He paused. “I think you’re wonderful.”
He touched my arm and I felt the hairs rise even though my body was warm. His fingers slid up, up, to my neck, to my cheek. There was a kind of ringing in my ears as he looked at me, as he leaned in. His lips were firm and his hands warm on my face. I couldn’t get enough air; I touched him back, his earring and the back of his head. I ran my fingers over his tattoo. He kissed like a man, and I thought of Danny and Keira, how it was going to happen, how I was going to have the three of them. I would stay there after college. The ringing continued, and I wondered who was calling, but it got louder and I realized it was a real noise, someone screaming. The voice was familiar. I ran out of the shack to see Keira pointing to the water and crying, yelling for her brother. My brain was foggy. I tried to remind myself what to do in those situations, not to think about the possibility that it was too late. I had the red flotation tube under my arm, the grains in the concrete were hard under my bare feet, and when the water hit my toes I felt the shock, and my heart pounding under my skin. His body was underwater, hair billowing out, and when I grabbed him, Danny felt light in my arms. And I had thought I could be a mother.

By the time I had him strapped onto the board, head immobilized, he was conscious. His chest had been so small under my hands when I pumped the water out of him. I worried about breaking his ribs, hurting him even more. Putting my mouth to his had felt wrong, the feel of Frank still on my lips. The puddle of water Danny had spit up dried in the sunlight.

Frank was at his son’s side, holding a sobbing Keira but not taking his eyes from Danny. Frank’s face was pale, washed out, and I stood away from him. All of the other patrons were out of the water, and some began to wander away when they knew Danny would be okay. Someone must have called Jennifer, because all of a sudden she rushed in and cried, “My baby!” My body locked and my face grew hot. I was unsure if I should look at her, if she would know. Was I now one of the other women? She bent to kiss Danny’s cheek, and then straightened, facing Frank anxiously.

“Is he alright? Is the ambulance coming? My God, what happened?”
I saw Frank’s mouth moving and his arms gesturing to me. I wondered what he was making up for her. I should have known what Danny’s face looked like when he fell and hit his head on the side of the pool. I should have known how many seconds he was under before I got to him. My hands were still shaking. Jennifer looked at me before bending back down to Danny, inclining her head slightly, a thank you I didn’t deserve.

The ambulance came and Danny was loaded into the back. They arranged for Keira’s grandmother to pick her up from the pool. Jennifer climbed into the ambulance next to Danny, and then Frank. He finally looked up at me in the moment before the doors closed, his face filled with lines. Regret, and conflict, but that the moment had happened when it did, or that it had happened at all?

We waited for the grandma. I turned to Keira and knelt before her wet, fear-ridden face. I held out my arms to her, and when she came to me I whispered, “He’s going to be okay. Your brother is strong, like you.”

Under my arms, her small rib cage expanded with each breath. I tried to stop shaking so she would know everything would be okay. I was the adult. I had to take care of her. I had to do my job, and Keira was a child and a patron I was supposed to be watching. How much had the others at the pool seen? If they had recognized I was gone, they would never come back. I would be fired. I wouldn’t get to see Mr. and Mrs. Kochar again. I realized what I didn’t do for her brother I could do for Keira. I saw that Frank was not an option.

Somehow her hug comforted me, and when I pulled back I looked her in the eyes.

“I hear you have an awesome knee-tuck dive. Your dad was telling me you got pretty close to a perfect ten with it. Wanna give it a shot now? You have the whole pool to yourself…”

The Red Cross had taught me that after an incident, if possible, get the person back in the water. Back in the water, back on the horse, to show that you can move past the incident, past the anxiety. Everyone else had left the pool, and it was just us. For a
moment I closed my eyes and breathed through my nose. It might be the last time I saw her.

“Do you want to do it together?”

Keira looked at me, back at the pool, and then slowly nodded.

At first she hesitated and backed away from the water, but eventually her shoulders relaxed and her body straightened. We stepped to the metal rim, our toes aligned on the edge, we breathed, and our bodies broke the silent calm of the water.
The Settling Snow

Jason asked Carolina to marry him seven months ago. They’d only been dating for three months when he knelt on a cloudless day at the park, just the two of them, the sun shining on all of the spring flowers. When Carolina looked closely enough at their petals, they shimmered as if made up of a sparkling dust, like ground-up beach sand. This is what she noticed as she held the tulips Jason had picked for her right then, waiting for an answer.

She knew it would be hard when she said yes. Jason was a single father, Aaron a seven-year old mute. She also thought what most people would say, that it was too soon, that she and Jason were both caught up in the rush of a new relationship, that they were rebounding. Jason was a widower and Carolina’s previous relationship of five years had gone sour. But she loved Jason and wanted to be a part of this family; she was willing to do what it took.

When she came into their lives, Aaron had already been silent for five months. He’d stopped speaking when his mother passed, when he’d finally realized she wasn’t coming back. Jason told her Aaron had done a funny thing that day: he put on all the t-shirts he had in his drawer, and sat in his hideout space at the back of his closet. He’d taped pictures of dinosaurs and birds on the walls that he cut out of magazines, and just sat in there, looking at them with his flashlight. When he came out he wouldn’t talk.

Jason and Aaron developed a system. When Aaron wants something and isn’t in shoulder tapping distance, he pulls a harmonica out of his pocket. A breath in and out means he’s hungry, a low C means goodnight, a whoosh of notes from left to right means that he’s angry Jason and Carolina aren’t listening to him.

The teachers at school don’t like the harmonica method. They try to get him to talk every day, but when he doesn’t, they resign to having him write his questions about multiplication onto note cards. They fear that he is not interacting enough. The other kids think he’s weird. They write things on note cards and ball them up or make them into paper airplanes and toss them at him when the teacher isn’t looking.
At night, after bath time, Jason reads out loud to Aaron. They read fantasy books and classic tales, prize-winning stories. They sit on the twin bed with their backs against the wall. Carolina smells Aaron’s Johnson and Johnson shampoo all the way down the hall. She listens to Jason read, the different pitches his voice takes. She has always been attracted to men who are good with children, but there is something even more so about Jason. He’s gentle with Aaron. In the time they had together without anyone but each other, they developed an intense bond that is visible in the way they look at one another, how Jason seems able to anticipate Aaron’s wants and needs. Often, especially when they were dating, Carolina felt a thrill at knowing that Jason cared for her, and was turned on by his dedication to Aaron, the way he’d stroke his son’s hair. She would look at his fingers and think of them inside her. This thought startled her, but she also liked it, and felt strangely awake, more so than she’d ever been.

Carolina has also come to realize that Jason takes pleasure in the silent life he’s created with Aaron, that father and son don’t need therapists and doctors as long as they have each other. At first Carolina was compassionate and complaisant, happy just to have been let into Jason’s life, and then Aaron’s. She thought their relationship was sweet, special. But she knows their methods aren’t right, that Aaron is missing out on his life.

Sometimes she watches him sleep. Tangled in the covers, sweaty, his hand still inside his pajama bottoms, she is amazed at the life flowing in his body. She is amazed that two people can create another person. Carolina wonders what kind of adult he’ll turn out to be. Even though she didn’t create him, even though he still doesn’t talk, she feels a surging pride in Aaron, and is grateful for the simple fact that she knows him, that she can watch him grow.

They first met at the gym. Carolina went during her lunch hour because she hated the after-work rush, all those men wearing shirts with the sleeves cut off, women whose tank tops and shoes and pants were color-coordinated.
Jason was one of those who seemed like he was concentrating really hard on the music in his ears, how he was pushing his body. He sat down at the bike next to hers, even though there was a whole row of empty machines. Carolina tried not to look at him too obviously. He had brown hair and glasses. Someone stopped to talk to him and she thought he had a nice voice.

When he pedaled he went fast. He didn’t slow eventually, the way Carolina did. She watched him lean into the bike, his face dripping, frowning. When she came out of the locker room, all showered and dressed, he was still there, still going.

One day they went out for lunch. Right then and there he told her that his wife had recently died in a car accident, that his son didn’t talk anymore. It was as if he wanted to lay it all out for her, to see if she’d stay. She didn’t know how to date anymore either, which somehow made them more comfortable around one another. She told him about all her previous long-term relationships, that she’d always put her job as an investment broker first. She didn’t want to do that anymore.

When Carolina first met Aaron he was sitting at the kitchen table at Jason’s, drawing in a coloring book. His crayons were lined up in a neat row on the table, and his tongue stuck out the side of his mouth in his concentration to stay inside the lines.

“Hi, I’m Carolina. What’s your name?” He looked up to her and smiled shyly, then turned to the cover of his book, where he’d written his name in big slanting letters.

“What’re you coloring?” she asked. He pushed the coloring book to her and pointed to a bunch of smiling cars. He handed her some crayons.

“You’re going to share with me? How nice of you, Aaron!” She started tracing the outline of a tire and asked, “So what’s your favorite color? Mine is green.”

He signaled to the main car, red, and she thought, I can make a difference here, I can help change this.

Jason told Carolina that he’d taken Aaron to a therapist. She had the boy sit on the floor and color pictures, to fill out diagrams since he wouldn’t speak. Jason said it’d been
obvious to him that this was about Aaron’s mother, and obvious to the therapist, but that coloring pictures didn’t seem to be helping. So he pulled his son out of there.

Carolina tried numerous times since then to get him to go back. She convinced Jason to go along with what the teachers at Aaron’s school were saying—that he needed to be in speech class—even though Jason confessed to Carolina that he didn’t want his kid to get made fun of for being in the “special class.”

“Honey,” she said. “He doesn’t talk. Don’t you think kids already see him as strange?”

Sometimes at night, when she’s feeling her most vulnerable and trepidatious, she asks, “What if Aaron never starts talking again because of me?”

Jason touches her forehead, fingers her earlobe. “This is about his mother, not you.”

“Yes, but it will all be final because of me. For him. For you. There’s a lot going on.”

“He’ll learn that you’re there for him in the same way his mother would have been. You’ll become that figure for him.” Jason wraps his arms around her and she hugs him tight. “I love you, Carolina.”

“I love you too.”

Carolina thinks what he said about Aaron sounds nice, that perhaps it’s true, but that most likely it is more complicated than that. She knows he’ll never call her “Mom.” But if he calls her anything, she’ll have succeeded. If he talks, being a new mother, and wife, will work out.

当他回家工作一天并建议去Charlevoix度假时，Carolina感到既释然又焦虑。Aaron仍然不说话。
Carolina feels the pressure of that silence more and more. Jason shows her pictures on his laptop of the snowy town square, the hotels on the water, and the lamppost-lit streets. They lean over the screen and he massages her shoulders.

“It looks so relaxing up there. I’ve never been, but it’s right on this isthmus between a small lake and Lake Michigan. There’s good food, we can teach Aaron how to ski, we could go ice-skating. It’s a beautiful area,” he says.

Jason sets the table while Carolina gets dinner ready.

“I could take Friday off work. It would be nice to get away. Aaron might like it.”

“It might be nice for us too,” Jason says, sidling up to Carolina and wrapping his arms around her waist. The trip will be like a trial run, a testing-out of what it will be like to be a family.

When they tell Aaron about the Charlevoix trip after story time, Jason has his arm around Carolina. This makes her feel better about the fact that Aaron looks at her in suspicion, as if it would be a more desirable trip if she weren’t coming. He seems to have gotten used to her, for the most part, but big things like this sometimes send him to his room, door slamming. The first time she spent the night he refused to have dinner with them, or to come out from the back of his closet. She stays with them on the weekends now, but Jason doesn’t think they should push it to weekdays until after they’re married, that it would disrupt their system. Carolina tells herself that this is logical, that it’s nothing personal, that of course it will get better over time.

“What do you want to try when we’re up there?” Sometimes she asks him questions out of the blue, to startle him into talking, to make him forget he ever stopped.

Aaron doesn’t say anything, but he doesn’t retreat to his closet or hide under the covers either. Instead he grabs another book from the shelf, settling himself into the blankets and pillows of his bed. To Carolina, it seems like an improvement.

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On the drive up to Charlevoix two weeks later, it begins to snow. The snow pushes against the car and telephone poles, blowing sideways. They can no longer see the grassy median, or the dead brown leaves at the foot of trees. Everything is covered in snow that was already there, that is coming in now. Jason gets off the highway and drives through a town with fake, Bavarian-looking buildings.

“We only have about an hour left,” he says. “This last stretch is on the back roads.”

They turn right at an intersection, leaving the blue and white buildings with pointed roofs behind them. Aaron is in the backseat with a Rubik’s cube, Carolina in the front with a magazine. She reaches over and kneads Jason’s shoulders. She loves to run her fingers up his neck into his hair. He looks at her and puts his hand on her thigh. Carolina feels a swelling in her chest, and when they look back to the road she still sees his eyes, bright and calm, amid the snow.

The sky is a dull gray mass of clouds. There is a spot where the sun is lighting behind, yellow and warm amid the falling snow in the sky. Pine trees line the road, their needles weighed down by the snow. The roads they’re on are salted and black, but they pass driveways to isolated houses that are thick with white, a single pair of ruts leading to the house.

Aaron plays a note on his harmonica and points as they pass horses standing outside of barns, their heads down to the snow. Small stone churches sit up on hills beside the road. In some places there are signs for snowmobile crossings.

Aaron stares out the window and begins to play lots of notes in succession on the harmonica. Carolina turns around and asks, “What song is that, Aaron?”

Aaron shrugs and continues sliding his lips back and forth over the metal. He blows and sucks and Carolina tries to control what comes bubbling up in her. Nothing has been changing. Jason takes her hand.

“He’s happy and excited about the trip. He’s never been somewhere like this before.”
She smiles at him and nods, the wind howling outside the car.

When they arrive in town, it’s dark. They drive over a thick, double-leaf bascule bridge that rises in the summer to let boats through the channel. Round Lake is on the right, and the channel winds its way out to Lake Michigan on the left. Carolina looks back and notices Aaron looking over the bridge at the water, at how dark it is. He clutches the harmonica.

When they check into the hotel, they find that their room is more like a mini apartment than a regular room. There are two small bedrooms, a bathroom, kitchen, and a sitting area. Big sliding glass doors open up onto a small deck that faces Round Lake. Aaron runs in a circle around the room. This is the nicest hotel room Aaron has ever been in. Carolina focuses on the luggage while Aaron tears through the suite, searching through the bedrooms and bathroom, pulling open drawers and looking under the beds, full of energy after the car ride. He runs to the sliding door and presses his face to the glass, cupping his fingers around his eyes. The window fogs from his breath. Jason and Carolina look in the cupboards in the kitchen and begin to unpack their bags when they hear Aaron knocking on the glass door. He knocks harder and Carolina looks up. Aaron seems worried and a little afraid. He motions Jason over and points outside to the lake. They both look out to the dark.

“We’re right on the water,” Jason says.

Aaron plays a high note on his harmonica.

“What is it, Aaron?” Carolina asks, brushing the hair away from her face impatiently. They’ve been in the car for five hours and she is tired. They’re both looking at him, waiting. Aaron’s eyes are wide and he begins to play the same note over and over again, repeating until it sounds panicky, until he is breathing in-between almost every note.
“What?” she asks again. Aaron’s playing becomes more frantic. He is almost hopping up and down as he plays.

“Aaron? What? What?”

The sounds echo and bounce around the room, clashing and ringing in their ears like an alarm.

“For God’s sake!” Carolina cries. She approaches him as if she’s going to smack him, and but instead rips the harmonica out of his mouth. “You need to calm down.”

Both Jason and Aaron look at her, bewildered. Carolina takes the harmonica and grabs her bag, goes into one of the bedrooms, and shuts the door behind her hard, like an accented note. She hears Aaron start to cry.

In bed that night, Carolina says, “You know something else has to be done? Another therapist or something?” She sighs. “It’s not healthy.”

“He was afraid the hotel was going to collapse into the lake. Because we’re right on the water,” Jason tries to justify. “The black water scared him.” He pauses. “And I don’t like that you grabbed his harmonica right out of his mouth.”

Carolina tells herself she is a grown woman. That she shouldn’t overreact, either.

“I’m sorry. I should have kept my cool. But he needs to learn that it isn’t an acceptable form of communication, that he can’t just do that.”

Jason is silent before saying, “I’ll decide what’s best for him.”

Carolina feels as if a rock has been shoved down her throat. “You don’t intend to include me in parenting? Jason, he’s a seven-year-old boy.”

Jason stares at the ceiling and Carolina imagines his words coming to her not out of his mouth, but out of every pore on his skin, floating in the air above them. She realizes that Jason thinks that his love and support are enough to fix Aaron. She feels his fear, irrational, that their connection, their time spent together, would be broken by
four words. She doesn’t recognize her own fear intruding on the situation. Instant Motherhood.

“This isn’t working,” she says.

“I know.”

“I wonder if he’ll even remember how to talk. What if he tries and nothing comes out?”

Jason is quiet. She doesn’t look to see if he’s still awake. The heat kicks on, loud and rattling, and Carolina thinks about Aaron sleeping across the hall, about the man lying next to her.

The next day they go ice-skating at an outdoor rink in a square next to Round Lake. It’s cloudy and cold, but they wrap scarves around one another and pull on hats and mittens. Aaron has never skated before, so when he rents his skates they also give him an orange construction cone.

“So you can hold onto something and not fall down!” the rental lady tells him. Carolina thinks it’s a stupid idea, that he’s not going to learn to skate properly if he’s bending over a cone, but Jason thinks it’s practical.

“There’re no walls to grab on to here,” he points out.

They skate around slowly together a couple of turns, Aaron sliding along with his construction cone. At first, he is wobbly and unsure, and Jason and Carolina skate on either side of him, encouraging. When he starts to get the hang of it, they take turns with him while the other moves away. Carolina practices skating backwards, and crossing her skates over one another around the curve. She remembers the feel of metal scraping against ice, of the snow she creates when slicing into a stop. The arches of her feet ache, as do the muscles along her spinal chord, working, holding her up. She looks out at
Round Lake as she moves. She goes into a slow spin, the synchronized skating of her childhood coming back to her, and then turns to Jason and Aaron. They haven’t seen her; they’re engrossed in one another, moving slowly on the ice.

When it’s Jason’s turn, he just goes fast, skating from one end to the other, around the perimeter of the rink, and he weaves in and out of the few other people on the ice. When Aaron sees his father skate like this, he gets rid of the cone. Jason skates towards him and Aaron falls. Aaron gets up but keeps falling back down, so Jason slides him the cone over the ice.

“Go ahead,” he says. Carolina watches.

While Jason returns their skates, Carolina helps Aaron get his boots on, and makes sure that his socks aren’t all bunched up in the toe, uncomfortable. She straightens his hat as he stands in front of her, and he stares into her face. She kisses him on the nose and then tickles him, and even through the thick folds of his winter coat he squirms in pleasure, her arms around him, and then she stops tickling, just holding him there. She feels a deep longing for Aaron to accept her.

When Jason comes back they decide to get hot chocolate and wander down Bridge Street. The sky begins to darken, and the old-fashioned street lamps come on. Every tree along the road is lit up with white Christmas lights. They pass boutiques, drug stores, coffee shops, and an American Spoon whose windows are filled with jams made from Michigan fruits. Aaron stops in front of a bookstore painted blue and points inside.

“Okay, let’s check it out,” says Jason.

A bell jingles when they open the door. It’s a small, quaint, warm bookstore, and there are only a couple of other people inside. They begin to look at bestsellers on the front tables when a fat, furry cocker spaniel rushes out from a back room. He runs straight up to Aaron, who kneels on the floor to pet him.

“Don’t mind him! He’s friendly and harmless.” A man with boots and a big grey beard clumps out of the back carrying a stack of books. “His name’s Cheeseball.” He sets the books down on a table and looks at Aaron. “He sure does like you.”
Aaron smiles and continues to pet Cheeseball, who wriggles in pleasure.

“Do you always keep him in the store with you?” asks Carolina.

“Yup. He’s become sort of a staple of this place. People like to stop in and see Cheeseball more than me.” He laughs before turning back to Aaron.

“What’s your favorite kind of dog?” Aaron looks at the man before going back to petting Cheeseball. Carolina looks at her boots. When these conversations happen she feels defensive of Aaron, but also ashamed because of her involvement in the issue, as well as her lack thereof. They’re an immediate reminder that something isn’t right.

“We don’t have a dog at home, so I’m not sure he would know different breeds,” Jason says.

“Ah, I see. In my opinion, a boy should always have a dog.” The man kneels to Aaron. “What’s your name?”

When Aaron doesn’t reply, Jason says, “His name’s Aaron.” Carolina moves over to the checkout counter, where she scribbles on a stack of sticky notes for testing out different kinds of pens. She pushes hard into the paper.

“Well, Aaron. Would you like to give Cheeseball here a treat?” He pulls a dog biscuit out of his pocket and hands it to Aaron. Aaron stands up and holds it above the dog’s head, and Cheeseball sits.

At the register, the man says, “That boy of yours sure is quiet.”

“Oh, we know,” says Carolina softly.

Jason looks at her before adding, “He hasn’t spoken in awhile.”

The man doesn’t say anything but instead sells Jason a book Aaron picked out. Carolina leaves the store, her jaw set, to stand out in the cold.

Outside, as Aaron says goodbye to the dog in the store, Carolina turns to Jason.
“How does this not affect you more?” Her nose runs and she feels indignant looking at him. His love for Aaron, while endearing, is also debilitating. She feels like the family unit is going down into a sinkhole. “Every day, these reminders that something is wrong with this little boy. I love him, Jason, I love you, but I can’t stand to see it happen.”

Jason takes her gloved hands.

“We’ll just keep trying to talk to him. Maybe we can set up a reward system or something.” Jason’s cheeks are red and his hair sticks out from under his hat. He looks perfect. Her hands shake she’s so upset.

“It’s like an uphill battle every day,” she whispers.

Carolina feels like every snowflake that lands on her shoulders is a sack of bricks. Cars slush by on the street next to them. She doesn’t want to be sucked down under the muck with them.

“Aaron is your son. It’s your job to love him and support him.” She looks up at the sky, at the snow coming straight down. “You’re not a bad dad. But how is this possibly going to work?” Her hand moves in the space between their bodies, towards the bookstore.

Just then Aaron bounces out of the door, brimming with happiness, covered in dog fur.

When they get back to the hotel Jason puts Aaron to bed without taking his coat off. Carolina leaves the bathroom door open as she brushes her teeth, and in the mirror she sees Jason gently shut Aaron’s door and then go down the short hallway. She doesn’t know what to say to him, and instead feels the weight of her own silence, of his. She hears the click of the front door. Since she doesn’t know where he’s gone, Carolina reads in bed to try to distract herself. It’s a tabloid magazine, lots of pictures, minimal text, and
she hoped that by focusing on the unraveling lives of celebrities, her problems wouldn’t seem so great. But she can’t even seem to focus on the photos, on who’s who or what they’re wearing. She doesn’t really care.

Some time later, after she’s turned the lights out and been dozing, she hears Jason come in. She can tell he’s undressing, maybe a little bit tipsy, by the sound the shirt makes sliding up off him, slow, and the belt buckle of his jeans clinking loudly on the floor. He slides into bed and his cold skin touches hers. Carolina wonders what he’ll do next. He finds her shoulder, and reaches around her stomach for her hand, and when she turns to him and opens her eyes, she touches his face and kisses him. Jason kisses her back, pulling her t-shirt over her head, her underwear down her legs. They hold on to one another tight.

On Sunday before they leave, they decide to drive through the neighborhoods out to see the Great Lake. Aaron has never seen Lake Michigan except in the summertime when the water sparkles and gently foams in the curl of the wave. They follow a sloping road up a hill. Trees stand like pillars on the right, while houses hug the road on the left. Thick, bright snow is still falling steadily, and everything around them is white. Carolina turns the radio off and they hear the snow crunching and squeaking under the tires of their car. She watches the flakes fall onto the car windows, and studies their shape in the instant before they melt, the pointed crystals and angles. On the other side of the glass the tall pine trees begin to thin, and the lake is finally visible between them.

Aaron plays a note on his harmonica and Jason stops the car so they can look out to the water. The lake is dark, dark blue in the distance, and turquoise up close. The waves are huge, white-capped and tilting, and the snow swirls and billows, pushing against the water. The sky is dull and gray against the lake, muted, and matched with the water everything looks like different shades of mercury. The heavy clashing of the lake against air pulls Carolina’s eyes. Their suitcases sit in the trunk, her clothes in one, Jason’s in another. She’ll take hers with her when she goes.
The back door opens and Carolina sees Aaron pointing, sliding onto the ground before running through the snow across the street. The gloves that are clipped onto the ends of his jacket sleeves swing as he runs, and Carolina pauses before she and Jason jump out of the car too.

Across the street, Aaron stands before a long, low stone house. Small rounded windows are built into the stone, and the front door is dark wood with a curved top. The roof of the house is thatched and wavy, like big, spread out ripples. A short stone wall made of stacked sandstone slabs sits in front of the house. Carolina looks again at the door and imagines having to stoop to get through.

Aaron stares at the house with wide eyes. Clouds of air come out of his mouth at regular intervals, steady and small. They watch him as Aaron walks up to the stone wall and touches it with his bare fingers. He looks so innocent and young, Carolina thinks.

“It looks like a place from the stories we read,” Jason says to him.

Down the street there is another house like the first in that it is low, with a gently swelling roof. The thatched edges are rounded over the top of the house and dip down to the windows, which are each decorated with a pine wreath. Green vines spread up the stone walls, and the roof is blanketed with snow. This house is not as long as the first, but it has a short, stout chimney in the center of the building, which is issuing smoke.

Snow drifts down around the three of them as they gaze at the house. Carolina can hear the soft sound the flakes make as they land on Aaron’s nylon jacket, on their heads.

“Do you want to take a picture?” Jason asks Aaron. Carolina pulls the camera out of her coat pocket and holds it out for him. They show him how to turn it on, which buttons to push to zoom in and out with, and then they stand back, but Aaron motions them over again. He wants them in the picture. Jason looks at Carolina and she takes a step closer to him. Aaron holds the camera up. He tests out multiple angles, scooting a little bit to the left, then to the right. Carolina smells Jason’s familiar smell, a mix of salt and his deodorant, and feels his hip pressing hers. She feels the engagement ring, cool around her finger. Aaron kneels in the snow-covered street in his jeans, his feet
underneath him. He focuses and the camera makes a clicking sound. When he stands there are wet marks around his knees and shins. Jason brushes his coat off and Aaron runs to the car, camera in hand. Carolina and Jason, still pressed close to one another, hurry after him under the falling snow.
When Everett and I arrive at the park along the Huron River, runners are already streaming along the trails. Rollerbladers sit on benches strapping on helmets and kneepads. Today is a day to be outside. We head into the office where other couples and families wait to rent canoes, paddleboats, or kayaks. Prices are written in pink chalk on a long black chalkboard above the counter, and Everett takes out his wallet and pays.

Last night ended in another fight. We’ve been bickering a lot lately about petty things—who did the dishes last, leaving the laundry out, and grocery shopping. But last night we got back on the topic that’s the real reason he’s been going out with friends so much and hasn’t been home.

We’re past the stage of dropping hints that I want to get married. After my younger sister Cathy married, she had a baby boy. She sends me videos of him laughing, gurgling, even of him sleeping, and they make me feel like someone is taking a defibrillator to my chest, great big electric shocks. I want to reach into the video and touch his toes, to laugh and cry at the same time. Everett knows all of this, that the biggest reason I want to get married is because I want to be a mother. He says, “What’s the rush? Once you have them you can’t take them back.”

Today is a day of reconciliation.

Out back, aluminum canoes float near the edge of the dock. The sun shines off the river and the boats, blinding in the summer morning. We head down to the water with the rest of the groups and wait our turn. I rub Everett on the back.

The boat scrapes alongside the dock as a teenage boy gets the canoe ready for us. He wears a bandana and a blue t-shirt that says “Gallup Park River Staff” in block letters on the back. We put on life jackets and he holds the canoe steady as we climb in and grasp the paddles.

The river is so calm that we decide to paddle upstream. Everything around us—the leaves, the grass, the moss—is a vibrant green. We pass people on their way down the
river and we nod and say hello, even though they look at us funny. We’re going about this wrong.

Being on the water takes off some of the heavy heat we’ve been having—high humidity that clings to my skin and makes me sweat from parts I didn’t know could sweat. A slight breeze cools the perspiration already forming on the back of my neck, the creases in my elbows. When I turn back and look at Everett, he pulls in long, hard strokes. He doesn’t even seem to realize I’ve paused in paddling.

I’m thirty years old. Sometimes I’ll sit, quiet, in my favorite comfy chair in the living room of our apartment when Everett is out playing basketball with his friends. I’ll have a book next to me on the armrest, but forget to pick it up. I stare out the windows at the trees and the blue sky. The sun comes in and casts tilted shapes on the carpet. I think about what it would be like to hold my own child, feel the heat of its body, the blood, my blood, pumping in its little neck. I become very aware of my own breathing, the way my chest rises and falls, and in that moment, believe that I can feel my life-force, my eggs, these chemicals in my body, shriveling up one by one, and dying.

He says, “What’s a couple more years in the scheme of things?”

Everett and I have been together for five years. That’s long enough for me.

Tree branches hang out over the water, and some fallen trunks lie near the banks. Painted turtles sun themselves on the bark. We look for their red and yellow markings and count them as we go.

“I want to go swimming,” I say to Everett. The water is clear and smells mulchy, slightly metallic, and fresh. Long grass ripples on the riverbed below, waving and yellowish. I want to reach in and stroke the blades. Instead I run my fingers along the surface of the water.
“The river isn’t clean enough. I’ve heard about people who’ve done it, but I wouldn’t recommend it.” One of the things I love about Everett is that he likes to watch documentaries and all kinds of specials about the environment and human impact on it.

“But it’s so beautiful, and it would feel amazing in this heat.” I dip my fingers in further before turning around to him.

Everett’s strokes slow as he’s talking. “You never know what kinds of chemicals are in here—you don’t want them messing with your body. You’ve seen those stories. Deformed kids coming out as a result.”

My body tenses and I know I should be careful. “I didn’t know you cared about a future child.”

He pulls his paddle onto his lap and looks at me. “I care about you. I don’t want you getting hurt, and yeah, maybe in the future I’d care about a kid, too. But you know I’m not ready. I want to live my life before I give it over.”

I can’t do anything but stare at the water as we move by. To me, having a family, having children, is living. I want to be living with him.

We pass a water bottle back and forth and I try to think of a way to put it so he’ll understand. I want to have energy to run around the yard with my kids and not get tired, to be exhausted but happy when I hold my crying baby and say, There, there. Mommy’s here. When we take photos I want to look young and radiant, smiling with my family instead of being annoyed at the spit up on my clothes. I look at Everett’s face and see the wrinkles that are forming on the sides of his mouth and in his forehead. I stick my paddle in deep and we pass more trees, more turtles, and canoe after canoe after canoe.

On our first date, Everett and I went for a walk after dinner. He took me to the Arboretum and we traversed the paths as the late summer sun set. Crickets and lightning bugs came out. We asked one another about music, books, and travel. We wanted to go to
the same places, liked the same things, and I got excited about my life just talking to him. Talking to him was so easy. We walked for a long time, and finally paused on the path under a patch of moonlight. He kissed me, and when I opened my eyes his were still closed, as if he was trying to savor the moment. I studied his lips and eyelashes and when he touched my face with his fingertips, I knew already that I was falling in love with him.

When I first mentioned kids he said that some day he’d probably want to be a father. I assumed that over time his opinion would change, that I would be the one to change his mind. The way he holds Cathy’s baby in the crook of his arm, how he adjusts the boy’s clothes—they only make me hope harder. He looks so much like a father.

Everett helps strangers when they drop their groceries. He stops to make sure the person in the car who went off the snowy ditch is alright. He leaves me notes in the pages of my book. Until him, I’d never admired someone as much as I loved them.

Sometimes I wonder how long it would take me to find another person I fit with. To find them, to fall in love with them, to decide to start a family together. By the time all that happened, maybe Everett would have changed his mind. I wonder about giving up something you love.

Further upstream, we go around a bend and paddle to a pocket along the bank, where we park the canoe. It stays floating, wedged against a fallen oak, the water pushing against it. I turn around so that I’m facing Everett, and reach for the soft cooler where I’ve packed sandwiches and green grapes.

Sunlight filters through the trees above us and lands on Everett in little patches. We put a leg over each side of the canoe and let the water run over our toes. Everett’s jaw muscles work as he chews his sandwich.

“This was a nice idea,” he says eventually. He looks up at the cloudless blue sky, squinting.
“It’s nice here.” I don’t know what else to add. We’ve been together for so long. The silences we share in the canoe have been growing more palpable over the past couple of months, their edges and shapes clearer, defined.

After we eat, we decide to keep pushing up river; we’ll be able to float all the way back down it at the end. The breeze in this stretch of the river feels good on my stinging face. Birds swoop into the trees to the right of us, and I take a deep breath in through my nose and try to loosen my tight muscles. Every time I have my period I think of what could have been. I realize that no matter how much I want it, how hard I love him, I can’t change his mind. The thought lands on my chest like a water-sodden log, rolling back and forth, flattening. There is another bend in the river, to the left, and we paddle near the bank as we move around it.

Suddenly, the wind stops. The air feels heavy and dead with heat. The branches of the trees stay still. I see another painted turtle, this time in the water, and behind it are five small ripples, baby turtles paddling in its wake.

Little waves slap the aluminum sides of the boat. My eyes follow the trajectory of the tip of the bow forward, up the river. Our canoe heads right for the ripples. Everett, steering from the back, doesn’t see them.

“Everett, no! Go the other way!” We’re almost on top of them and I splash with my paddle, digging into the water to try to change our course.

“What are you talking about?” He keeps paddling, confused, and we glide right over the spot. I hear the backs of their little shells scraping and bumping along the bottom of the canoe, down the length of the whole body, a screeching like nails. I turn around to see if they’ve resurfaced, if they’ve been hurt. Can turtles drown in water? Can people drown in air?

“We ran over them.” My voice shakes, a whisper, and feelings lodge in my chest faster than I’d like. I feel as if I’m being pressed into the boat, to the muddy traces made by a mix of river water and dry dust in the hull. It’s too hot; my breath is too thick to leave my lungs and comes out slowly, languorously.
I look at Everett’s face and think about all of the places on his body that I’ve kissed, that I’ve loved. I look at him and feel like I’m melting, falling apart in my love and unhappiness. I grip the sides of the canoe, cold and gritty, and want to fall into his chest, to feel his beating heart against my ear, but he’s on the other side of the canoe, just looking at me. We pull our paddles in and let the river take us.
One night Sandy and her children Jeremy and Amy walk down the beach to the new condos being built. They trail along the water’s edge, leaving faint footprints in the sand that quickly wash away. The water level is higher this year, and the stretch of sand between the water and the beach grasses is only about twenty-five feet wide. Sandy picks up rocks, examining them and putting them in her pockets. Jeremy and Amy lick at ice cream cones that Sandy made them. Amy squeals when she finds the hidden layer of banana slices inside. While she laughs with her kids, Sandy imagines how the condos will turn out: garages, vaulted ceilings, and spaces for big picture windows that look out over Lake Michigan. Right now the walls are still wooden planks with spaces between, skeletons of a home, but even so, their presence suggests something bigger, something close to menacing.

The sun is on its slow descent towards the lake, and the water ripples and flashes with orange. They pass small ranch homes, new houses built into the slope of the coast land, a wooden gazebo settled into the grasses, and a Hobie Cat sailboat pulled up on shore. Plastic shovels and pails lie forgotten on the dry sand. Blackened fire pits from recent bonfires dot the beach; these will only multiply by the time the Fourth of July comes on Saturday.

When they reach the condos the family stares for a moment, the stretch of building standing quiet between birch and pine trees set back from the beach. The piece of construction, the fresh wood, looks foreign amid the nature. These condos, in a small town in the pinky of Michigan, are a big deal.

They climb up the slope to the beach grasses and pick their way through the sharp, thin stalks.

“They’ll probably build a deck or something down to the beach, right, Mom?” Jeremy asks. He and Amy are nine years old, but he takes his role as man of the house seriously. Sometimes Sandy sees the light from under his door at night, darkened only when she has turned off the TV and also gone to bed.
“I think you’re right. The summer people want a smooth path to carry their beach chairs and volleyballs.”

They emerge out of the grasses onto a compound, the ground of which is a mix of dirt and sand, of Styrofoam cups and McDonalds wrappers.

“They’re not very clean,” says Jeremy.

There are six condos connected in the stretch of building that faces them. Identical holes look out from each one. They can tell where the sliding door will go, where the windows are. Sandy and Jeremy lead the way up to one of the holes, but Amy says, “You can’t go in from the back. We have to go through the front door!”

She grabs her mother’s hand and they follow her around to the front. Cement has already been poured before the doorways, and navy blue doors with gold colored handles sit inside the frame. They wait on the porch for Sandy to try the doorknob, and when it turns, she leads them in.

The inside is flooded with light from the setting sun. Wooden frames mark the partitions between the rooms, and they smell the powdery plaster and sawdust. Empty pop bottles lay scattered on the floor. Jeremy and Amy move through the condo, yelling, “This one’s the bathroom!” and “This has to be the kitchen!”

Sandy takes her time, touching the wooden beams as she goes. She imagines the plain white drywall that will go up, the new beige carpeting or polished wood floors. Plastic light switches. That newly built smell.

They head upstairs and Jeremy and Amy look into the rooms, decide which one’s bigger, fight over which would be theirs. A breeze blows through the bare walls from the lake, stirring up the dust. Sandy looks out the space where a window will go, at the water. She has the same view from her home a half-mile down the beach. She prides the view and her property on the water she inherited from her deceased parents. Sandy grew up in the house, in this town, and feels a connection with it that she is unwilling to share. She is always here, has always been here. The people who will stay in these condos—who have the money to rent what she knows will be a very expensive place—these are
the people who only come for the good part. They want the warm weather and the beaches and water. They want the quaint little towns with summer festivals and outdoor dining on the channel out to the lake. They only come for the good part, and then they leave.

Sandy met Drew, the father of her children, the summer she was twenty-eight. He was tan, his body sturdy, and she was immediately infatuated with him. Drew arrived at the beginning of the summer to stay at a cottage he’d rented. He was from the southern part of Michigan, a much different place with freeways and taller buildings, of shopping malls and business suits, and so they taught each other what they knew. Sandy showed Drew the constellations in the dark sky, and how to identify the eagles that soared down the beach. Drew taught her how to repair her old car, and with him she learned to enjoy fishing off the pier. They went out in his speedboat and spent nights on the beach in a tent, wrapped up in blankets and one another, where they also taught and learned.

At the end of the summer, Drew left to go back home, to work. Soon after, Sandy found out she was pregnant. She wrote him letters detailing what the doctor had said, how the weather was growing gray and cold, the lake a violent spray of water, but he never replied. She grew bigger and rounder, and nine months later when she had Jeremy and Amy, twins, when it was warm again and the air smelled clean, of fresh water and plant life, she knew she wouldn’t be seeing him again. She didn’t bother with child support. Sandy didn’t want that kind of a person to have anything to do with her children. For that’s what they were now: hers.

Jeremy and Amy are tanned and have brown hair like Drew. Their hair doesn’t bleach in the sun like hers does. Jeremy has his eyes. Sometimes she can see him in them and has to remind herself that her hate for him cannot be displaced onto her children. When she feels this angry surge she looks for aspects of herself in them, such as her long fingers and the curved bridge of her nose. But Sandy also looks for aspects that are unrelated to either parent, ways in which her children are their own people.

Sandy heads back down the stairs, by herself. Walking around the perimeter of the condo, she stares down at the space between the partitions, the inches that have not
been filled with insulation or electrical wiring. She reaches into her pockets and pulls out the rocks she collected from the beach and moves around the condo, methodically dropping them down into the space between.

When she’s done Sandy calls to her kids, telling them to grab the pop bottles on the way out the door, that they’ll take them to the store the next day and recycle them, ten cents each.

Back at home, once they’ve rinsed their feet off with the hose on the side of the house, Sandy tucks her children into their twin sized beds, Amy in hers, and Jeremy across the hall. They talk about their days, about going to the fish fry in town the next night, and they pull the covers to their chins.

When she turns off the lights, Sandy stands in the space between their two doorways and sings. Her voice is clear and low; the sound of the waves through the open window accompany her. Jeremy lies on his side, eyes closed, and soon his body begins to twitch in the early stages of sleep. Amy watches her mother and tries to keep her eyes open as they begin to droop. Sandy smiles and sings to her, her little girl, I’ve built my life around you. When they begin to drift off, she backs slowly into the hall, her voice getting quieter, until finally it is only the lake, her accompaniment, her partner.

Friday is fish fry night. Cars park along the sides of Main Street, and bicycles lean locked to light posts. The smell of fresh, battered perch floats in the air outside of North Point, the restaurant that Sandy, Jeremy, and Amy go to for their weekly dinner out. The crowded back porch is awash with the six o’clock summer sun, the tables full of sunburned faces and people wearing sunglasses. Vines creep up the brick of the building, and a wooden staircase leads down to a walkway along the channel. Sailboats and
motorboats putt by on their way out to the lake, some passengers waving to those on shore.

Sandy and her children chat with their waitress, a girl who went to the same school where Jeremy and Amy go, where Sandy works as secretary. Sandy loves getting to know the kids, seeing them in town once they’ve moved on to the high school, and she loves that her hours and location make her available for her children.

After dinner, they walk down by the channel and throw leftover bread to the mallards in the water. The ducks snap and kick, reaching their necks out and honking at one another.

When they climb the staircase back up to Main Street, they pass shops along the way. The windows are filled with Vera Bradley handbags, beach cover-ups, expensive sunglasses, and jewelry. Real sand has actually been dumped into one store bay window, with sandals arranged on top of it. An ice cream vendor is on the corner, ringing a little bell, and Sandy contemplates buying a cone just so she can smear it on the storefront window.

The next block, they stop by the drug store to say hi to Sandy’s friend Debbie. Debbie gives Jeremy and Amy free candy bars and they wander the aisles while she and Sandy lean against the register counter and chat. Debbie has been in town as long as Sandy has. She remembers going to prom together with their dates, life guarding at the public beach, flirting with the tanned boys. Now Debbie stocks her store with kitschy items like t-shirts that say, “I’m an up-north kid!” or cheap postcard prints of the lake and dunes. Debbie really gets into the summer tourist season, as it’s when she makes her best money.

“People need band aids and sunscreen and, let’s be honest, condoms,” she says. Sandy knows this isn’t a comment against her getting pregnant, as they’re way past that, but she can’t help but feel annoyed, betrayed, anyway.

The worst part about it is that Sandy finds the tourist men more thrilling than the locals. The local men only know small trades, and she’s known most of them, all their
faults, her whole life. She’s never known big cities or corporate jobs, the electricity of places where stuff happens. When these men come into town she can practically see the sparks coming off their skin. After Drew, Sandy tried dating some of them. They were fun and one of them told her she should bring her kids, move to the city with him. He didn’t understand when she said she couldn’t, that she didn’t want to leave the lake, and he wouldn’t consider joining her there. Her home was dull to them; they always left, no phone calls, no letters. For one bright moment she saw them assimilating into her world, but then they became part of the larger group once again. Sandy is so ashamed of these feelings that she pretends they aren’t there. She hasn’t even told Debbie, though she suspects Debbie knows. She’s stopped dating and channels all her anger, which she feels is justified, into hating them all.

Back outside they wander towards the car, which is far away. The streets get congested in the summer, and it’s hard to find parking spots. When they pass Rose’s Art Supply Store, Sandy notices that a square of sidewalk is blocked off from the rest with thin wooden sticks and little orange flags. “Wait,” says Sandy, stopping Jeremy and Amy. “Let’s leave our handprints here.”

They kneel to the wet, gray cement and Jeremy and Amy fight over who gets to put their hand into the mixture first. Sandy demonstrates by pressing her hand into the lower right corner of the square, her fingers evenly spaced. Jeremy goes next, and then Amy. They push their hands down next to hers, grinning at the feel of the gritty cool squishing between their fingers.

Afterwards, they wipe their hands in the grass around the bottom of a lamppost.

“Will anyone step on it?” Amy asks.

“No, sweetie. I don’t think so. It’ll dry soon and then every time we walk by here we’ll see the place where our hands are.”

“My friends are gonna be so jealous!” Jeremy cries, dashing forward and spreading his arms. Amy runs after him, and Sandy laughs, following them to the car and picking the grit from under her nails.
At home, Jeremy and Amy lie in front of the couch and watch TV. Sandy folds laundry on the dining room table, the piles separated into little t-shirts, shorts, and balls of socks. They’re watching *The Lion King*, when Jeremy asks his mother, “What happened to our dad?”

Sandy has heard this question before. She’s always been honest with her children and tries to be gentle, nonpartisan. She sits on the couch.

“Your dad had other things he was doing with his life. He’s a busy man.”

“What does he do?” Amy asks.

“He’s a businessman. He works in a big, tall building with lots of windows.”

“I think I wanna do that,” says Jeremy. “I want to wear a suit to work just like my dad.”

Sandy stares at the wall and feels the dryness of her eyes, like she needs to put drops in them. She sees the pictures hanging there. She, Jeremy, and Amy. She turns to her son. “You could try it, but I don’t think you’d like it very much,” she tells him.

“Yes, I would. My dad likes it. Lots of people have that job. I want that job.”

Amy sits cross-legged, looking back and forth between the two of them. She murmurs, “Well I don’t care about him,” but no one hears her.

Sandy starts, “Well, all right, I’m just trying to tell you—”

“No. I want that job. I can do whatever job I want.” Jeremy gets up. He throws his shoulders back and stands up straight. He walks back and forth across the room, taking wide steps. “This is what I’ll look like.”

She doesn’t have anything to remind her of Drew. No photos, clothing, or movie stub tickets. After she had Jeremy and Amy, she threw them all into a bonfire. Sometimes
she wishes she had something of his to give her kids, but then tells herself a clean cut is better. Sandy pretends she never felt anything for him.

“You don’t know what it’s like to be in a city, you don’t know what things are like there. They may not be as great as you think.”

Jeremy has always been satisfied with her answers about Drew before. He’s never been so curious or argumentative. Maybe this is what happens when you have a son and there is no father figure, when that boy grows exponentially every day. Sandy wants him to stay with her; she wants to be able to provide everything for him.

“Maybe they are. I want to try. I’m a man. My dad’s a man. You can’t tell me what to do!”

“Don’t talk to me like that, Jeremy.” Sandy also stands up. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, I do. When my dad—”

“Shut up, Jeremy!” Amy yells from the couch. Sandy walks out of the room, into her bedroom, and the door clicks shut behind her. She sits on the bed and wonders how long it will take her to get this right. Sandy hears whispering, and then sees Jeremy and Amy’s shadows moving on the other side of her door. They stand there for a minute, as if listening, as if expecting her to be banging and crashing away in anger, which is what she wants to do sometimes, but doesn’t feel she can.

Jeremy and Amy like the summer months because all of the tourists mean more kids to play with. The beaches become patchworks of towels, umbrellas, and sand castles, and it’s easy to make friends. They get bored during the winter months living on the lake. The snow barricades them in, and the kids from school aren’t close enough to get together with. Sandy knows this and lets Jeremy and Amy run around with them, these other kids who wear water shoes, even though it makes her a little uneasy.
It’s the Fourth of July and the public beach is packed. Families have brought lawn chairs, coolers, and blankets, which they spread on the sand. Kids run around waving sparklers, balls of energy in anticipation of the firework show that will take place soon, once it gets dark. Some teenagers have brought their own fireworks, which they set off by the water. They fly out over the lake, showers of blue and green and purple flares. Some small fireworks shoot up from the bundle of boats that sit floating on the water. Their sparks reflect on the surface, broken up by small ripples, and their bangs and pops echo out over the beach, startling and urgent.

Sandy painted Amy’s nails red, white, and blue in celebration of the day, in preparation for the night, and Amy runs around showing them off. She and Jeremy push their new friends on the swings, shoving hard to see how high they can go. The beach here has merry go-rounds, monkey bars, slides, and public restrooms with damp cement floors and soap dispensers with no soap in them. The sky turns purple around the edges.

Jeremy and Amy dash over to Sandy, and two new friends, a boy and a girl, follow behind them.

“Mom!” Jeremy yells to her as he’s approaching. “Mom, we’re going to go play down by the water, is that okay?”

The girl is a little bit taller than Amy, and Sandy guesses she’s ten. The boy, however, looms over her children, tall and solid, his hair long and in his face. Sandy feels uncomfortable in his presence, though she cannot say why.

“How old are you?” she asks him.

The boy blinks at her through his hair and says, “Twelve.”

“Where are your parents?”

He points through the crowd to a couple not too far from her. They sit in lawn chairs, digging through a cooler full of beer. She remembers when that used to be her and those men she dated. Sandy looks at Amy and Jeremy, their faces excited, expectant.
“Stay where I can see you, okay?” They run off down the beach towards the water as Sandy sees Debbie coming towards her.

“I wasn’t sure I was going to find you,” Debbie says, sitting down on the big blanket Sandy brought. “There’re a lot of people here this year. Where’re Jeremy and Amy?”

“Playing with some new friends.” Sandy digs her feet into the blanket, into the sand underneath. “I hate all these crowds.”

“You’ve got to get a man, Sandy,” Debbie says, lighting a cigarette. “I went on a date with this really cute guy who came into the store the other day. I’ll tell you, anybody who can kiss like that will take your mind off these crowds, that’s for sure.”

Someone from the group near them calls to Debbie to put her cigarette out, that the smoke is blowing in her face. Debbie waves and pretends not to hear, and Sandy says, “Oh please, Debbie.”

“What? It’s nicer than saying ‘screw you.’”

“You basically are saying screw you.”

“Yes, but in a nicer way.” She smiles and touches Sandy on the shoulder. “Lighten up, darling. Besides, from the way you act about those people, I would think you wouldn’t mind a little smoke heading their direction.”

Of course Debbie’s right, but Sandy is tired of the fact that Debbie knows her so well, that she calls her out on it all the time. It’s not as if Sandy doesn’t have a right to feel the way she does. It’s like a little flame that sits inside her, never extinguishing, her body hunched around it.

A cool breeze blows in off the lake. Sandy scans the people by the water for Jeremy and Amy. It has grown darker now, it’s almost time for the show, and she squints her eyes, looking from person to person. She finds them and the boy and girl, isolated from the rest of the crowd. She knows immediately something is not right because Amy is pulling at the skin on her elbow, nervous. She sees the top of a steel tube sticking out
from the sand; it’s not buried deep enough, and the fuse from the mortar shell snakes out
the top. The parents are standing by talking to one another. They don’t see the boy with
the hair in his face light the fuse and run, the tube leaning in the sand, leaning in the
wrong direction. There is the explosion, the boom, close and immediate, black powder
clouding the air, and the red firework going off not over the lake, but heading into the
crowds, into her kids. Sandy sees the sparks crackling behind it, the group at the shore
running, tripping. Where are her children? Why can’t she see them anymore? It is as if
her brain can’t distinguish the individual from the whole, and instead of seeing Jeremy
and Amy, the startled, scared faces of multiple people fill her vision at once, crowding in.

The firework was not low enough to hit anyone, but Sandy is still furious. When
she finds the parents of the boy she yells at them that they must be stupid to allow a
twelve year old, unsupervised, to set off a firework so large that you need a permit for it.

“Do you have a permit? Do you?” she roars.

The parents stare at her before saying, “We’re sorry. We really are. But no one
got hurt. And it’s the Fourth of July. Fireworks. What’d you expect?"

They don’t understand. They don’t see how close it was to hitting her children,
how stupid they are for bringing it here, to a public beach. This is the beach she’s been
coming to see fireworks at for thirty-seven years. Her whole life. And they come in with
their beer and explosives and tanning sprays, not understanding what it’s really like, what
it’s like to live here when the winds come in and the snow is so blinding the people
around you disappear.

They don’t stay to watch the show. Sandy drags Jeremy and Amy home, driving
down the windy coast road in silence. She forces herself to drive the speed limit, and her
hands shake on the steering wheel. The kids sit in the back, unmoving, knowing not to
talk until she does.
But she doesn’t say anything. And she doesn’t get to the house. She stops at the condos down the road, leaving her car door wide open. The fireworks have started, their booms vibrating the wooden structure, the beach grasses shivering. She picks up one of the scrap planks lying on the ground and goes into one of the condos.

The first hit feels good. The contact of wood on wood jars her, is harder than she expects, but she keeps going. She strikes at the wall beams, the window frames, the stairs. The fireworks light up the dark spaces. She doesn’t think about the sounds her children hear out in the car, or if they’ve snuck up to see exactly what she’s doing. She stabs at insulation, pulling it out of the wall with the end of her now-splintered weapon, like cotton candy on a stick. Other than this ripping, her hits don’t do too much damage. The place is built more solidly than she would like to admit, and her plank isn’t strong enough to take down engineered architecture. But she feels good having done it, a jab to those sons-of-bitches.

Out back, under the flashes of green and pink, she hurls the piece of wood into the lake, hoping that maybe it will get knocked around enough, smoothed down, and turned into driftwood.

When she gets back in the car, Sandy wonders if her children are now afraid of her. Maybe she should have dropped them off at home, first. But that’s not the way anger works, she reasons. It’s not scheduled. When they reach the house the fireworks are just ending. Sandy leads Jeremy and Amy out to the back porch where they sit in silence, watching the tiny explosions of other families’ fireworks dot the horizon down the lakeshore.

“T’m sorry,” she says to Jeremy and Amy. “I’m not mad at you.”

The stars come out above them. She’s staring out at the lake, trying to distinguish the line between water and sky, when she feels Amy at her elbow, touching her arm. Amy leans in to hug her, wrapping her tiny arms around her mother’s shoulders, and Sandy pulls her daughter to her, thankful. But Jeremy hangs back. Sandy feels his eyes on her, evaluating, angry, and she starts to sing, but he goes inside, shutting out her voice from where he is going.
Voice in the Cedars

There is a bundle of land that my university owns in Door County, Wisconsin. The spacious lodge, used as a retreat center, sits on Lake Michigan and is surrounded by acres of forests and trails. It’s the beginning of the semester, senior year, and there are five of us in my writing class, six including Paul, our instructor and mentor. We are just starting out with our senior thesis projects, just starting out with each other.

The trees here are beginning to change color. After our morning writing, Jim, Carly, Joy, Marty and I take a walk into the woods to find the rock formations Marty told us about. The air is crisp but the sun’s rays are unusually warm, and I go out in just a long-sleeved shirt. Above our heads, pines and cedars, birch and maple trees sway to a slight breeze. The leaves range from green to gold, orange to violent red, and I pick ones off the ground to press in my books. I think of showing them to Derek, and wonder if he would care. We venture off the path and climb over fallen trees, hold back branches for one another. Carly has her camera, and snaps pictures of exposed roots and the sunlight filtering through the canopy.

The air is fresh and smells like sweet, rotting leaves. We trudge through the weeds and underbrush until Jim points. The rock formations emerge out of the land—huge gray, mossy crags that we can walk between, that we run our fingers along.

“I found these last winter when walking out here,” says Marty.

We duck into the empty spaces, look for evidence of sea life, of fossils and skeletons in the rock. I picture Marty shuffling through the snow out here by himself the way I’ve seen him walking around campus. He slowly swaggers with his hands in his pockets, moving as if his small body were stocky, his knees bent outwards. His legs don’t touch.

Sometimes I see Marty with his girlfriend. She has blond hair and bright eyes, a high-pitched voice. When she visits for the weekend she wears his sweatshirts and he puts his arm around her. This is what I wish Derek would do with me. We’ve been
together over a year and he’s stopped holding my hand, wanting to go places with me. He sleeps with his back to me in the twin size bed.

Before I left for the weekend, Derek walked me to the bus that drives students up here. We stood facing each other and I touched his shoulders, rubbed the arms that I love. I wanted him to kiss me, to say “I’ll miss you,” but he didn’t. I should be used to this, but I couldn’t help the way my chest felt like it was collapsing in on itself when he turned away.

After the rock formations, we find a thin dirt path and hike along it. Squirrels and chipmunks scurry up trees when they hear us coming. I watch the way Marty moves around the roots and rocks and branches. I watch his shoulders slope.

We end up at Lake Michigan, in a clearing with lots of angular boulders stacked and leading out to the water. We survey the waves and smell the wind. Carly takes pictures of us all. Joy decides to go swimming in her clothes, shorts and a t-shirt, even though the air is not quite that warm and the water is colder. We watch her from the rocks, point to her goose bumps when she emerges.

Back at the lodge we sunbathe on the wooden porch. I lay on the benches built around the deck, my sweatshirt under my head. I feel the space between the planks in my back. Paul comes outside and suggests we take a drive into Door County now that Joy is dry. Because the trees are changing it will be a beautiful ride.

As we stand up, Paul points out to the lake and says, “I guess he’s not coming.”

I see Marty’s body through the trees. He is wading into Lake Michigan by himself, the waves splashing up against his bare skin, soaking his boxers. He pushes his hands forward, as if to part the water. I try not to stare as he battles the wind. There is something mysterious about the way he ventures into the water by himself, something resolute and different from the way that Joy went in. He goes under.
Dinners at the lodge are wonderful because the food is hot and has flavor, unlike the soggy dining hall food we’re used to. The whole back wall of the great room is lined with chicken and vegetable pot pies, soft rolls, freshly cooked green beans and carrots, and home-made cookies and cherry cobbler. We fill our plates and the six of us sit around a large table. The room is full of the sound of talking and silverware clinking against plates.

“Do any of you have dish duty tonight?” Paul asks us, while sliding bread around on his plate. All student groups have a chore to do at the lodge, whether it’s sweeping the wood floors, setting up for meals, or doing dishes afterwards. I glance up and notice that it’s grown dark outside. I see the colorful reflection of all our bodies in the tall windows. I see Marty in his green shirt.

“We had dish duty in the morning,” Jim says.

When I look away from the windows I find Marty smiling at me. There is a boyish quality about him, about the way he smiles when he talks, how he’s smiling at me now. I smile back.

Carly chimes in and tells Paul about the chores we had to do in the morning, how the hot dishes almost burned her when she took them out of the washer, and how she got to talk to the chef.

“Why do you ask, Paul?” says Joy.

Paul pops his piece of bread into his mouth and says, “Because I’m taking you all out.”

There is one bar in Bailey’s Harbor, Door County. It’s on the side of the highway, has a small parking lot, and is surrounded by trees. It is called the Blue Ox.
Students aren’t allowed to leave the lodge grounds unless they want to walk to church or the ice cream shop during the day. There are no lights on the road and cars drive fast around the curves. The six of us sneak out of the lodge and to the car Paul drove up in. The night is quiet and the wind blows in the trees above us. We pile into the seats and sit on one another’s laps. I wonder where Derek is and what he’s doing. He probably doesn’t think that of me. Sometimes I’m so angry at what’s happened between us, at the way he treats me, that I shake, but then he comes into my room, just looks at me, and again my body trembles, but in a different way.

The Blue Ox is small, one main room with a pool table, bar, and some wooden tables. Inside there are a few locals, but we are the big group. We order beers and shots, vodka and gin. On the far wall of the bar is a horn, with a metal disk hanging from the ceiling in front of it. With his beer in one hand and the ring in the other, Paul explains how we must swing the disk onto the horn, what the best technique is to use. We must all attempt to make it. After a couple tries, I do.

The rock music is loud. It blares above us and Joy gets up on the bar to dance. The bar is high and we’re afraid she’s going to lose her balance, but she doesn’t. A man holds a dollar between his fingers and waves it to her. We are laughing and talking, swaying in time to the smoke and music in the air, to the alcohol flowing in our bodies.

Paul is one of the newer, younger professors at our school, but he is also one of the kindest. It might be because of this, or because I am drunk, but when he asks me about my boyfriend, I say, “It’s not good.” I’m surprised to find Derek far from my mind.

“Why don’t you leave him?”

I think about what it would be like to see him in the dining hall, the library, at parties, or to see him with someone else. I think about what it would be like to sleep alone.

Marty must have overheard some of our conversation, because all of a sudden he is at my side. “Do you want me to kick his ass?” The music is loud and I don’t know how
to answer. Carly comes up and throws her arm around my shoulder, swaying back and forth.

“Isn’t this a great song?”

In the bathroom I look at the dirty blue and white tiles on the floor, at the grit in the caulking. The stall is so narrow I barely fit into it, and I try to focus my eyes. I touch the painted stall walls. I am drunk and happy. These people are my new friends.

At the bar we stand clutching our drinks. There is so much noise, so many little neon lights. The walls, the ceiling, the windows all have a dim glow. I’m surprised when Marty touches my shoulder, rubs the soft fleece of my shirt and says, “I like this,” before turning to talk to Jim and Joy. He doesn’t hover close by, but later on, he looks straight at me and says, “We should talk later.” After that, whenever he moves I feel the space of his body as he passes by me. There is heat and solid mass.

Paul insists he is sober enough to drive, so we all pack into the car and head back to the lodge. When we arrive, we try to be quiet, pretend that we’re sober. Joy grabs a bottle of rum she has hidden in a bag under her bed before we go outside. The grounds are dark and quiet, and the sound of the alcohol swirling in the glass bottle echoes loudly around us. We walk close together, bumping shoulders and laughing because it’s so dark we can’t see. We head down a wide woodchip and dirt path that runs parallel to the lake. It opens up into a grassy clearing and a bonfire pit. Some other students from a different group have built up a fire, so we sit on the logs and wood benches surrounding it.

The fire crackles and I hear the waves against the rocks on the other side of the beach grasses. We put our shoes to the fire, watch the glow on each other’s faces. Marty begins to talk in literary terms, about didactic writing and syntax. He has a theory about synchronically and diachronically moveable language. I have no idea what he is talking about. All I see is the excitement in his eyes, the way his body sways with the alcohol. I have stopped at one pull of rum, but he is still going.

We decide we need to move, and all get up and stand in the grassy field next to the fire pit. We put our arms around one another and form a circle, bowing our heads
together. “I love you guys!” Joy yells. Marty is next to me and I feel his hand on my back, the pads of his fingers pressing into my fleece. His body is warm and I lean into him.

Our circle splits and Marty whispers that we should go talk. We move off into the darkness. The grass slopes downward, there is a narrow path between a bundle of cedars, and then we are at Lake Michigan.

The beach here is covered in smooth, white fist-sized rocks that stretch out to the water. Moonlight reflects off the ripples of the surface and lights a path to the other side of the lake, to Michigan. We sit on a log and I think about how I just want to wake up and be loved by someone.

“Remember the class we had together last winter? I wanted to ask you out,” Marty says. He rubs his hands together. “Your writing is always the first that I look at. Sherri doesn’t read my writing.” He turns to me and I can tell that something is happening between us. Marty doesn’t try to move closer or reach for me, but his eyes are unblinking and when he smiles it feels like he is touching my cheeks, my lips. I wonder about Sherri, what kind of person she is, if she’s as nice as she looks.

“There has to be a reason why you’re here. With me,” he says.

The night air is cool against my face and I watch as a breeze pushes small waves in to the shore ahead of us. I look at the shape of his squared knees, feel the heat coming from his body. I think of Derek and the walks we go on every Friday, of showering together and the way he doesn’t talk to me when we are with his friends.

“Are you the kind of guy who shows affection in public?”

Marty doesn’t hesitate before saying, “Yes.”

We look at each other, and I know we’re drunk, but he’s looking at me, really looking deep at me in a way I haven’t felt in a long time. I can’t hear the sounds of anyone else, of the campfire, from where we are here. The only thing is the wind in the trees and the sound of the waves, his body next to mine.
I look out to the lake and wonder what we’re doing. *There must be a reason you’re here with me.* Tomorrow we will go back to campus, to sitting in classrooms, to eating soggy food, and waking up wanting to love. The moon is bright and there are so many stars in the sky, so many I can see here that I can’t at school. I see now there are people outside, outside of Derek, and me, and I know what must happen when I return.

Marty looks at me and his words, his voice, hang in the air.
Coming down the hill he can smell the river. It smells like a small lake or maybe a pond: mildew; wet moss and earth on the banks; leaves hanging in the water, rotting.

Instead of going to class, Brian goes to the river a lot now. He sits on the slabs of concrete left over from the old dam stacked along one edge of the bank and watches the tide rise around him. He doesn’t care about grades anymore, and since he’ll at least pass his courses, they’ll still let him graduate. He puts his feet in the water. The sun warms the rock under him, and Brian slides his fingers over the bumps and grit while thinking of his dead dog. Teal died last summer; she was old, but he misses her. She would lie under his chair at the dinner table and at the foot of his bed at night. He’d grown up with Teal, and when she passed, it was like an omen of the wreckage to come.

Because he was away at school, Brian didn’t see it coming. He hadn’t been able to watch for hints in body language, in tone of voice, or in the places they slept. When he came home for spring break he found that his mom had repainted the living room a vibrant red. She’d started basket weaving and her creations littered the kitchen counters, hung off doorknobs, and filled the bathrooms. He found a jug of wine hidden behind the coats in the entryway closet. A day later his parents sat him down and told him they were getting a divorce.

“There’s something more,” his father said. Brian’s mother left the room at this point. She tried not to let Brian see her face, and she didn’t come when Brian yelled, when he ran out of the house, slamming the door so hard a pane of window glass fell out. She came to him later, and though she wanted to be the one to comfort him, Brian held her as she sobbed.

Moving in with someone that wasn’t his mother. Moving in with another man.

Moving in. With. A man.

Brian remembered playing catch with his dad in their backyard on summer nights. They played without shoes, the grass cool and damp on the warm soles of their feet. The
ball hit hard into his glove and Brian remembered feeling right, like the moment was so American, so father-and-son.

Now Brian questions his relationship with his father. He doesn’t know who his dad is. Maybe he doesn’t even like to play catch. Brian feels frightened of coming face-to-face with his dad, whose spotted skin and wrinkled neck make him seem vulnerable, unworthy of Brian’s anger.

Brian throws rocks into the river and realizes that what makes him the angriest is the fact that all of this could have been avoided. That had his father known himself well enough, had enough courage, he would never have gotten married, hurt Brian’s mother, hurt Brian, in the first place.

Now, at the end of the semester, Brian still dodges his father’s calls. He doesn’t know what he would do with anything his dad had to say. Brian phones his mom everyday to make sure she gets out of bed, eats, weaves. He looks up jokes on the Internet to make her laugh.

He starts going to a bar off-campus at night with his friend Joey to play shuffleboard and drink Wisconsin-made beer. He likes the combination of chance and skill in sliding the heavy metal disks over gritty sand, likes the disjointedness of his limbs from his body. People tell him it’s an old man’s game but he does it anyway. Brian likes playing with the old guys. He stands under the bar lights talking technique to whoever will listen, messing with the zipper on his jacket. He’s told Joey about the divorce, about his dad, but not anyone else. Even after he told Joey, Brian said he didn’t want to talk about it.

Brian used to have a girlfriend. He dated Alice for three years. They used to go for walks at night up and down the muddy trails along the banks. The moonlight shone on the rippling water and in the distance they could hear the crashing of the river through the dam. One time in early fall they’d made love on an old abandoned railroad bridge, the
wood dark and soft under their bodies, the river flowing beneath them. He loved the feeling of her fingers running across his shoulders, of her hands on his waist. He was only a couple of inches taller than her, and thought their bodies fit perfectly together, as if they latched together the same way the beams below them did. Brian and Alice had planned on moving in together after graduation, but in the fall, her advisor told her she was eligible to finish a semester early. Alice found a job in Columbus and took it. Suddenly he was out of the picture and the person he would have talked to about his family was gone.

People keep asking what he’s going to do after graduation. Is there a job? An internship? Grad school? Before spring break, he planned on moving home in May and seeing what happened. Now he doesn’t feel he can return home. There is no home. His mom can’t afford the house by herself and talks about moving to a condo. Brian knows his dad will expect to see him, will want him to come over to his new place with Otto. *Otto and Michael*. Brian’s tried doing a job search for places outside of Wisconsin, but since he’s starting so late he hasn’t had much luck. He knows by the ache in his chest that after graduating he’ll have to go back, because, at the very least, he reasons, someone has to take care of his mom.

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Brian had been begging for a dog for years. When he was nine he sat his parents down and gave a full presentation about why having a dog would be beneficial to him, how it would cultivate responsibility and give him a playmate since he didn’t have any siblings. He’d drawn a chart of the times a day he would walk the dog, how he would feed it and love it. He had a list of possible names ready. His mom was still hesitant about everything in the house smelling like an animal. Brian knew it was his dad he should speak to. Brian’s dad listened to him as if he were an adult, nodding and asking questions like they were in a meeting or classroom. Brian trusted his father. He was always reasonable and gave good advice. When his dad had consented to a dog, Teal, he knew his dad trusted him, too.
When Alice left, Brian’s dad said, “Your life is in a period of flux. It’s only going to get harder, more confusing, because that’s how life is. But you’ll figure it out. And when you do you’ll land right side up.”

Brian remembers these conversations. It’s easy to say those things, but now Brian wonders if they really mean anything, if they’re more than just words, inspirational jargon. Everything is falling apart and he wishes he could chart his life out, morning, noon, and evening, that his life was still as simple as that.

The Thursday night before graduation, before the families start arriving to take their kids out to dinner and walk around campus snapping lots of photos, Brian, Joey, and two others from their dorm, Orin and Sarah, decide they’re going to explore the catacombs beneath the university. They’ve heard rumors about the hot, steamy tunnels that twist below the buildings to the river and the old power plant on the opposite bank. Other graduating seniors have gone down there before, and Brian sees it as a sort of rite of passage. He’s been talking about it for days, trying to convince them of the allure, their last days together, their last days before facing jobs, grad school, their parents. It’s dark outside, the moon hidden, and Brian suggests the mission with a reckless abandon, let’s do it right now, ignoring the concerns of Sarah and Joey, the dangers of what could ensue down there.

They dress in ratty t-shirts and tennis shoes, and Sarah pulls her hair back. Brian notices the muscles in her arms, the swiftness with which she twists the hair tie. He imagines her hair would feel soft in his hands. Orin puts his arm around Sarah, his girlfriend, and reassures her that everything will be all right. Brian feels a flash of contempt for Orin. The name so similar to Otto.

Outside, Joey looks to make sure no one’s around, and then pries the sewer cover up. When he pulls the grate away Brian already feels the thick heat pulsing out, soaking
into his clothing. They slip inside, cover the entrance behind them, and pull out flashlights. The concrete walls are covered in dirt and a kind of thin grease.

“Alright, let’s go,” Brian says.

They take off down the tunnel, the floor gritty underneath them. Pipes tread along above them, dulled and steaming. Sometimes they have to duck and walk hunched over because the space gets tight.

“Be careful not to touch the pipes.” Joey points up. “They’ll burn you.”

As they slope downwards, Brian imagines the earth above them, the buildings and people in them, walking atop them, a normal night. He wonders what it would feel like to be crushed by it all.

He can tell when they get near the river because the air starts to smell musty and dank. More condensation hangs around them. He sees the dust, now wet, muddy particles, clinging to Sarah’s arms and face.

“It’s as if you can hear the water churning,” she says. Brian imagines the ripples, the current swirling. The tunnel suddenly comes to an end, and they follow a stairway up, the pipes following along with it, until they emerge into the night and hear the river around them. The pipes continue across the river inside the confinement of the new dam, the water crashing through its openings, a constant flowing. The power plant on the opposite bank stands dark, clouds billowing from its chimneystacks. A rusting ladder leads up the side of the dam.

“Let’s climb up,” Brian says. The thought of the two extremes against one another, of being under the earth and then above it, makes him feel jittery. Brian thinks of his father and wonders what he would make of this night, what he would say. He feels like he’s in a dream going bad, about to turn worse.

“Brian, I don’t want to,” Sarah says. “It doesn’t look safe.” She tries to give him a little smile, sorry.
“Ok, you can wait here. Joey? Orin?” He looks around, his foot already on the bottom rung of the ladder.

“Yeah, I’m not so sure,” says Orin, moving to stand next to Sarah. Brian thinks, he’s an asshole anyway. He turns to Joey, who looks at him for a long time. Brian knows Joey can tell his body is pulsing with energy, that he wants to keep moving but is straining to hold it in. He feels like the water shoving through the dam. Joey’s stare makes him uncomfortable. Brian just wants answers, something concrete to appear out of the void he feels he has become, that his family has become. Why did this happen? He can’t stop worrying about his mother. He hears things he doesn’t want to know. She called him last night, drunk, to say she should have seen it coming, that when the requests came to try uncomfortable moves in bed, and then ceased altogether, she should have known. What was he supposed to say?

“I think we should probably call it a night,” Joey says. He gives Brian a little shrug of the shoulders. It’s not a big deal, let’s just go. The word “fuck” runs through Brian’s head. Fuck. Fuck this. Fuck you. Fuck them. Fuck the world. Don’t fuck my dad.

“Whatever.” He climbs back into the tunnel. The others follow in the silence he casts into his wake. They’re sweating and dirty, and the flashlight beams suddenly feel feeble amidst the mass of earth and metal and concrete around them. They hunch to duck the pipes, tucking their elbows in to avoid the ones running along one side of the wall. Brian’s footsteps encourage the rhythmic reel of thoughts in his head. They repeat over and over.

There’s a gushing noise and the air around them suddenly grows hotter, steam letting out of the pipes. He stomps his foot hard, Fuck, and stops, trying to shake the words. Someone bangs into him and a scream echoes around the narrow walls of the tunnel. It’s Sarah. Brian turns around slowly, can almost hear the searing of her skin, her bare arm, sees the burned-away shirt at her shoulder through the thick air. It’s gotten her cheek too, which looks raw and bubbly in the dim light.

“What the hell, Brian!” Orin yells, hovering over Sarah, unsure of whether or not to touch her. Brian’s mesmerized by the burns on her skin, by the feeling that something
is eating him from the inside out. Sweat pours down his neck and his lungs feel about to burst.

“We have to get her out of here,” Joey says. All of Brian’s energy is gone now and he doesn’t know how to move. He watches Joey and Orin gently lift Sarah off of the ground. Her eyes are closed, her lips pressed together. It’s not until Joey bumps into him that Brian realizes he’s in the way, that he has to move. He doesn’t remember the rest of the tunnel, the wait in the hospital, or Orin telling him to pull his head out of his ass. What he remembers is the clang of the sewer grate, the white, almost blue of Sarah’s fingers, and the vibration of his cell phone in his pocket, unanswered.

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Brian is afraid to talk to Sarah, to talk to any of them. It’s his fault. Joey stops by his room and tries to reassure him that everyone’s fine, that Sarah will be okay, but Brian barely hears him.

Parents start arriving for graduation weekend. Brian told his mother not to come down until the day of the ceremony. He didn’t say anything to his father, which was his way of announcing you’re not invited, but he has a suspicion his mom passed the time and day along to him. All of graduation now seems like an ordeal.

Graduation day is cloudy and windy. Big gusts blow the tops of trees sideways, and fill the air with petals from the flowering crab apples and dogwoods. Brian sets out for a run, leaving his room and the thoughts that sit like thundering clouds above his head. On his way through campus he dodges seniors starting to pack up their stuff in minivans, parents milling around walking dogs, and people playing Frisbee on the green lawns. The wind brushes his hair back, and his t-shirt flaps against his sides.

Once off-campus Brian feels less claustrophobic. He tries to listen to the sounds around him instead of thinking. The soft scritch-scratch of his sneakers against the gritty pavement. His hair flapping against his head. The squeak of car brakes.
Brian ends up at the small hospital without knowing that’s where he was headed. He stares at the gray building, its entrance lined with waving daffodils, before going in.

“I need the room for Sarah Hoffmeyer, please,” he says at the front desk. It’s not a hard room to find, 214, but once he does, Brian is afraid to approach. The door is open, he sees an older woman in the bed nearest him, asleep, and then Sarah in the bed by the window. She has the television on, part of her arm and face wrapped. Mostly second degree burns. Joey said she’d be able to leave by the end of the day.

He can’t think of anything that would be good enough to say to her. I’m sorry isn’t enough. Should he tell her about his family? Brian doesn’t want her sympathy, but maybe it would help her understand his moods. Maybe she’s had family issues, too. Maybe she would be far more understanding than he knows. She’d touch his hand and tell him, I know. I understand what it feels like.

The woman in the other bed shouts out in her sleep, and when Sarah turns to him, to the open door, Brian presses himself against the wall, hidden. He walks away as quickly and as quietly as he can, rolling his feet like a runner does from heel to toe. Heel to toe.

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The following day Brian watches all of his classmates line up for the procession in alphabetical order. They play with the tassels on their caps, unzip their robes in the heat. Someone’s parents run alongside the line taking pictures before hurrying back to their seats. Brian counts down the line to the place he should be standing. All of the robes mesh together so he can’t see the spot where he belongs. He sees Sarah mid-way down the row with the H’s. Her face has a wide bandage on it, as does her forearm. She doesn’t look to be in any pain. Joey stands back with the R’s, looking calm and a bit bored. Brian is envious of him for this. He doesn’t bother looking for Orin.

Brian’s cap and gown are folded neatly on the ground next to him. He stands under a tree across the street from the procession and big white tent where the ceremony
will be held. His mom is in there somewhere. She stopped by his room to give him a kiss and hug before everything started, to say how proud she was. She didn’t even seem to remember her phone call. He tries not to think about where his dad is, how he wants him there but at the same time doesn’t, and instead peels strips of bark off the tree.

When everyone is finally seated, the band finishing up “Pomp and Circumstance,” Brian heads towards the river, leaving his cap and gown behind.

This time he climbs the rusty ladder rung by rung, prickly under his fingers, the river stopped up and then let go right in front of him. Brian feels a strange tingling on the back of his neck, like he’s being followed, but there’s no one behind him. The metal of the dam is cold under his hands and knees when he gets to the top. He stands up, and although the height makes him a bit nervous, his stomach and chest expanding like a balloon, he is also excited, at creating this feeling for himself. He sees his dorm on the bank and the broken slabs of the old dam, the river twisting away in the distance. Behind him is the old railroad bridge. He looks at his dress shoes against the concrete, and walks to the edge. He wonders if this is what being on the high dive at the pool is like. Brian watches the water flowing beneath him, gushing out of the dam in spurts, pressurized, before he hears someone calling his name. On the bank stands his father, dressed in a blue button down and khakis. He’s here. Brian can tell he’s wearing the shoes with the little tassels on them, his nice dress shoes. His sunglasses sit on top of his head, his white hair, and Brian can’t help but think how he looks even older. How much can a person change in a couple of months? Does he have a new ring on his finger? Brian can’t tell. All he knows is that the man is here, where Brian hadn’t wanted him to be. He wants to yell out, he’s so angry, but doesn’t know what he would say. He can’t tell how time has dissipated or enhanced his feelings. Brian doesn’t even know where they come from, if they’re justified. He feels incredibly overwhelmed, and instead of yelling words, those precise signifiers, he wails into the wind, his cries drowned out by the churning of the
water below him. He feels a surging, his body physically electrified, and when his father yells his name again and stretches his hand out, Brian jumps out into the churning river.

His feet hit the rocky bottom, hard, and his ankle twists funny; he can even hear the snap underwater. The water pushes and eddies around him, and Brian has to work hard to swim away from the dam, up to the surface, but it feels like his body is tangled in something, pulling at him. He thinks of swimmers and wonders how they move through the water so quickly, when moving his limbs now creates a burning in the muscles and in his chest. He forces himself to keep his left ankle limp, to try not to move it any more, but doesn’t look at it. He wonders if he could get sucked backwards into the dam. Brian’s running out of air but finds he isn’t afraid; instead he’s surprised at how cold the water is. He is shocked by it, and by the sight of his dad. Even to think the word dad reminds Brian how they’re connected. He feels his blood moving slowly through his body, and as he’s gradually propelling toward the surface he feels hands around his waist.

Brian and his dad splash toward the bank, claw their way through the mud and grass to sit, panting.

“Are you crazy?” his father asks, his tears mixing with the river water running down from his hair. They shiver slightly, the morning sun just starting to warm. Brian stares at his ankle, swollen and bruised, and isn’t sure whether he should try to ignore the throbbing, or focus on it.

Brian tries to picture his dad with Otto. He thinks of his mother and the alcohol, those damn baskets everywhere. But his father is so present, sitting in front of him with his shoes still on, draining water. There are no rings on any of his fingers. He has the scar near his eyebrow from when Brian was nine and accidentally let go of the baseball bat while swinging. He has the same haircut he’s had for Brian’s whole life. Brian realizes maybe his dad had just been living a lie he’d liked.

Brian hears distant applause from the graduation tent over the hill of the bank. He imagines everyone tossing their caps into the air. His foot is practically pulsing. All of a sudden he sees his jump into the water as a sort of baptism. His life will be okay. His dad touches his shoulder and Brian does what comes naturally, their cold dripping clothes,
their arms around one another, rocking back and forth, and he finally feels as if he’s turning right side up.
How to Anticipate

At swim practice I’m the first person to dive into the pool. I start swimming even before practice officially starts, before everyone’s in the water. I watch the red numbers of the clock ticking on the wall and the rungs of the lane lines as I pass by. Finally everyone else slides in and Coach gathers us around. I hear his voice but not what he’s saying.

Yesterday my family learned Kayleigh’s gotten worse. Her white blood cells are up. I came home from school to find her, my mom and dad on the living room floor, trying not to cry.

We follow through the list of drills slapped to the side of the gutter. Jocelyn, who’s been swimming with me since we were ten, follows behind me in our lane. She’s the closest friend I have on the team and at school now that Kayleigh doesn’t come anymore. She’s careful around me, acting in response to my moods. Once I slammed my locker in her face and yelled at her to stop asking me about my older sister. “That’s all I ever hear!” I said. If I had the courage now I’d tell her that someday, I’d like it. That it would be nice to talk about it with someone I don’t feel guilty admitting my fears to.

Today I swim harder and faster than I ever have. I pound the water with my feet and fingers. My skin stings and my muscles burn. My body is capable of this. I also miscalculate the distance to the wall and slam my head into it when I flip. I run into Mary, swimming in front of me. I get water up my nose. I can’t concentrate on anything but the image of Kayleigh on the carpet, shredding every paper ever printed in attempt to understand what was happening to her. Our parents next to her just watching.

I stay after practice to move in the water by myself. There is a space between my swim cap and ear and I hear the gushing of the water around me. I hear the sound of my own breath. When I turn my head to the side I can tell that the lifeguard is watching me, and suddenly I am conscious of how he sees my body through the water, through my swimsuit. I feel my breasts, larger this year than last, pressing against the nylon and polyester.
Someone’s body moves by in the lane next to mine. Jocelyn has gotten back in the pool. She swims a slow and leisurely backstroke. When she turns at the wall, I watch her underwater as I move down my lane. She pushes off, gliding on her back, undulating, her skin glowing white. When she breaks the surface, water spurts from her mouth.

After a couple more laps we pause for breath, hanging on the wall. She says, “You didn’t come to the locker room.”

I wipe the snot stringing from my nose. “I didn’t really feel like going home yet.”

Jocelyn looks at me, circle marks around her eyes, and before she has the chance to say anything else, I pull my goggles back down.

We push off hard and though I’m moving and spitting and crying into the water I’m glad to have her next to me.

At first we can’t see what’s happening inside her. We go back to eating meals, going to school or work, taking meds. Kayleigh’s days are spent mostly stationary in her bed or on the couch. The changes seem gradual. But we can feel them. She’s weak. One day her gums start to bleed and Mom has to take her to the doctor. She spends some time in the hospital. I don’t like to hear all the details about her treatment. Sometimes I look at her and she seems normal and healthy.

Thursday, when Mom gets home from the store I help her unload the groceries and put them away. Kayleigh sits at the kitchen table looking through a magazine while we work. Today, eight days after she came home from the doctor, is a good day for her. She’s walking around, out of bed. Not feeling wobbly or queasy.

I look through all the groceries as we put them away. I’m craving something sweet after practice. Yesterday I’d written Oreos on the grocery list sitting on the counter, hoping Mom would pick some up for me. After everything is in the cupboards and refrigerator I realize there are no cookies at all.
“Mom, where are the Oreos I put on the list?”

“Honey, you know those aren’t healthy.”

Everything in our house is healthy now. There’s all kinds of info out there about what kinds of food people like Kayleigh should and shouldn’t eat. All-natural foods don’t encourage the bad cells. We don’t get a lot of sweets, and avoid almost anything that’s packaged. It’s tiring going to school and seeing other kids with lunches I want. I want cookies and chips. Sometimes I buy them from the school vending machines, but I don’t have a big allowance so I don’t do that every week.

“Mom, all kids eat cookies. It’s not like I’ll eat the whole bag in a day. They’re for my lunches.”

“I don’t eat cookies,” Kayleigh says from the table. “I want to, though.”

“Cassie,” says my mom. “You know Kayleigh can’t eat things with lots of sugar in them. I can cut up some fruit for you and put honey on top? Or we have rice cakes?”

My mom looks at me, pleading.

“Why do I have to give them up just because she can’t eat them? I’m not the one who’s sick.”

“Don’t you think it’d kind of be like waving it around in front of my face?” Kayleigh says, turning to me. “Like a temptation I can’t afford to have?”

“I just want some freaking cookies! It’s really not that much to ask for.” I feel the anger moving up my body. “I shouldn’t have to sacrifice my life for you.”

“Giving up cookies is nothing.”

“It’s not like you’d even know we had them.” I can’t stop pacing, moving around while talking. “You don’t get out of bed enough to notice.”

“Cassie!” my mom says.

Kayleigh looks at me. “Don’t be a bitch.”
It’s the first time she’s called me that. The way it sounds coming out of her is different from the way it sounds when kids in school or people on TV say it.

“You’re the selfish bitch.” Before I can see the look on my mom’s face, or let Kayleigh react, I head up to my room and slam the door as hard as I can just so they hear the rattle.

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In third period, during Mrs. Thomas’ Spanish class, a note passes along between the rows of desks. Connie Frank, one of the most popular and well-dressed girls in school started it, folding and folding until it was in the shape of a small square you could hide in your palm. The note moves between members of her group of friends as Mrs. Thomas writes on the board the difference between present perfect tense and the present perfect subjunctive. Cody Burch gets it next. I watch the way his fingers move between the folds of the paper, how his hair falls over his forehead and ears as he reads it under his desk.

Cody and I have had four classes together since the beginning of high school last year. I’ve lent him pencils and we’ve been put into project groups to work together. Kayleigh once told me that the way to tell if a person has a crush on you is to see if their body turns towards you. Cody was sitting next to me but was turned slightly in to talk to the group. I wanted to know if he was leaning towards me, or leaning in to the center of our desks pushed together. One time, after conjugating the verb “conocer” on the board, he looked at me the whole time while walking back to his seat.

As I remember this, the note lands on my desk. I look around to see if it was meant for someone else, if maybe I’m supposed to pass it on, but everyone is facing forward, listening to Mrs. Thomas. On the front of the square, written in Connie’s blocked handwriting, is my name, along with everyone else’s she passed it to. I open it quietly. Because it’s Friday, she’s inviting us all to her house after school for pizza and then a bonfire when it gets dark. I’m not sure why she’s included me but I see Cody’s reply on the note, along with everyone else’s, that they will be there.
I’m supposed to go with Kayleigh to the bookstore tonight because she’s still feeling well enough to go out in public. Kayleigh loves books and she loves the atmosphere of a bookstore. She’ll sit down right in the middle of an aisle and pull them off the shelves, read their back covers and run her fingers over the print.

But I’m still angry. The word “bitch” stays in my body. I want to have a normal Friday night and maybe even get kissed by Cody by the bonfire. I want Connie and her friends to like me. I’m sick of having to tiptoe around the house because Kayleigh is always sleeping, of having to eat what she can eat. It keeps me up at night when she vomits.

I write on the note that I need a ride, but that I’ll be there.

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After school I meet Taylor Foster, another girl from Spanish class, down by the parking lot. We were in Girl Scouts together but haven’t talked much since then. She’s leaning on the side of her car smoking a cigarette. I watch the wind twirl and push the clouds she exhales until they’re gone.

“Thanks for offering me a ride,” I say. Taylor throws her cigarette on the ground and smashes it out.

“No problem. I’ve got room.”

The inside of her car smells like cat litter. The backseat is piled with clothes and empty food wrappers, and I check to make sure I’m not sitting on anything sticky. She turns the music up loud.

“So what’s new in your life?” she asks. “We haven’t talked since like middle school.”

I watch the trees pass by, the green leaves just starting to change. “Oh, you know, not a lot. School is busy. I’m taking Calculus and that’s taking up a lot of time.”
“Wow, Calc as a sophomore?” She looks over at me, her eyebrows raised.

“I like math.” Taylor puts the windows down and my hair flies all over the place. I stick my hand out and let it surf the wind.

“How’s your sister doing? I haven’t seen her at all so far this year.” I can tell she’s trying to be nonchalant and sensitive at the same time, not sure of how I’ll react. “I hear she’s pretty sick.”

I take a deep breath. Kayleigh talk. “She is. Obviously leukemia is bad, but what she hates the most is not being able to go to school anymore. She has a lot of friends that stop by to chat but it’s not the same.”

“I get that. Going to school and seeing my friends is the best part of my day.”

When we get to Connie’s most people are already there. The house is set back from the road with a wide lawn and a long driveway. We park next to the other cars in the grass.

Inside, pizzas line the kitchen countertop along with bowls of candy, as if it were Halloween. Everything looks new: the shiny appliances, the wood floors, the granite island. Music pumps from the speakers in the living room through the open windows to the back deck, where everyone is.

With my pizza in hand, I try to make small talk with all of these people I don’t know. I ask them about their classes, how their summer was, what they think of Mrs. Thomas. They answer politely and stand awkwardly next to me before turning back to the person telling a story or joke. Some of the kids start dancing to the music, but I don’t. I feel exhausted and empty.

I head back inside and run into Connie’s mom, who is slipping on her shoes. She’s on the PTA with my mom, and though I’ve never known her because I’ve never hung out with Connie, she’s always been around.

“Cassie, I’m so glad you could make it!” she says, as she straightens up.
“Thank you for having me, Mrs. Frank.”

“Oh, it’s my pleasure, dear. I’m glad Connie took my advice to invite you—some fun out of the house is good for the soul.” She rummages through her purse. “Mr. Frank and I are going out to dinner so you kids have fun! Tell your mother I said hello.” She hurries out to the garage where Mr. Frank is waiting with the car.

So it was a pity invite.

Outside, they light the bonfire. The brush catches easily and smolders down to the branches and logs. I find an open bench around the fire and sit. It’s getting cooler at night, and the heat feels good against my face and knees. I stare into the flames, their flickering orange and blue, and at the pulsing black and red glow of the wood.

Someone starts passing around a bottle of wine. Cody sits down next to me and I think about how to position myself so he can tell I like him. When he hands me the wine our fingers touch. I take a sip because he did, because everyone else did, even though it tastes disgusting. I think about everyone else’s saliva sloshing around in the alcohol. I want to cough but instead hold it in and my eyes water.

“Are you having a good time?” Cody asks, stretching his legs to the fire.

“I like bonfires,” I tell him. “They’re mesmerizing, easy to lose yourself in.”

We stare into the flames for a minute before he responds. “They are pretty awesome.” He turns to look at me. “Not having fun otherwise, then?”

I give him a small smile. “You can tell? Sorry. It’s just that I don’t know anybody very well. I actually came here with the opposite intention of being a Debbie-downer.”

He laughs and his eyes are kind. Someone calls for him from the other side of the fire. It’s Connie.

“I’m sure it will get better,” he says, and then walks off. I watch him skirt the benches until he reaches Connie. She laughs and reaches for his hand, pulling him down for a kiss. Her fingers knit into his hair.
Cody is not going to kiss me. These people are not going to be my best friends. I already have a best friend and she’s lying at home dying. I suddenly feel like I’m going to be sick. I go back into the house, shut myself in the bathroom, and call my dad to come get me. I don’t say goodbye to anyone.

In the car, Dad’s silent the whole way back. It’s not until we’re in the driveway that he says, “Tell us where you are next time, Cass, okay? It’s alright if you want to go out and do things, but your mother and I just want to know where you are.” He pats my shoulder gently. The gray hairs in his mustache glint in the light from the garage. “Your mom’s a bit upset that you forgot about Kayleigh tonight. Why don’t you run upstairs when we get inside and I’ll talk to her.” He gives me a smile, but something about it, in his eyes, looks sad. Suddenly I feel bad for my outburst about cookies, which I’m sure he heard about from Mom.

“Thanks, Dad.” We hug over the parking brake and shifter. I push my head into his shoulder. I want to tell him what all this feels like, but he looks exhausted and the words don’t come up out of me. Instead I grab my bag and head inside.

When I peek into Kayleigh’s room, she’s already in bed, her reading lamp glowing softly. Her fans are all on, spinning around her, which means she’s probably not feeling her best. I wonder if my leaving her behind caused her to get worse. I knock quietly.

“Hey,” I say. She doesn’t answer, so I walk in. She’s lying on her side and I check to see if she’s sleeping, but her eyes are open.

“Did you go to the bookstore?”

She stares at the wall and won’t look me in the eye.

“Look, Kayleigh, I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have ditched you tonight.” I look around at the collection of postcards tacked to her wall. They feature places she’s been and places she wants to go. They cover almost the entire wall. “Taylor Foster asked about you. Do you remember her? From Girl Scouts?”
All of a sudden I hear her sniffling, and I look down. She’s crying. I touch her on the shoulder, then take my shoes off and climb into the bed. Her body is hot but I put my arm around her.

“Cassie? I’m scared,” she says. The fans spin, blowing cool air across the bed, rippling the shoulder of my shirt. “You know those stories you hear? About kids with diseases and all they go through and how tough they are?” She turns to lie on her back. I nod and look at the sweat on her face, see the damp places on her shirt where it’s soaked through. “Well that’s not how I feel. I feel like a jerk.” Tears run down the side of her face towards her ear. “I don’t want to die.”

“I’m scared too,” I tell her for the first time in the two months since she’s been diagnosed. It feels nice to confess, to let down the brave face, but I feel bad for admitting it to her. I’m supposed to be strong and positive. That’s what the doctor told us. That Kayleigh needs support and good vibes, that her body will pick up on it, that she’ll take on the same attitude and fight harder. Most of the time I’m holding a burning ball inside my chest. It never goes away.

As I hold her, I resolve never to let Kayleigh down again. She’s the one that taught me how to blow bubble gum. She helped me convince our parents to take us to Disney World. I noticed the way she treated the other kids in our neighborhood—giving them rides on her scooter, letting them borrow her jump rope, helping them up when they fell. She was the oldest. She always took care of everyone. Now it’s my turn.

Kayleigh keeps getting worse. The chemo and drugs aren’t working like we thought they were. Mom and Dad look at me out of the corner of their eyes, and I know what they want to ask me, but don’t have the courage to. I’ve started looking things up on the internet, and at the library at school. Mom officially quits her job and stays at home all the time, watching over. Kayleigh looks so small under her covers. It’s like there’s not even a body under there anymore.
One night Mom comes up to my room when I’m working on some math problems. She knocks on the door and when I say, “come in,” she gently pushes it open. She sits down on my bed, a plastic bag next to her.

“Come here for a minute, Cassie.”

She smoothes the covers before I sit down and holds the bag out to me. Inside are packages of Oreos, candy bars, M&Ms, and gummy bears. All my favorites.

“You should be able to have these things, Cassie. You’re right.” I rip open a packet of M&Ms right there. Mom doesn’t usually like us eating in our rooms but she doesn’t say anything about it. Instead, she reaches for some gummy bears and asks, “So what friends have you been hanging out with from school?”

I tell her Jocelyn is my friend. That I see the kids from swim practice every week. That there are some nice seniors in my calc class. She looks at the red gummy bear in her hand.

“This has been really hard on all of us, Cassie. But I don’t want you to forget to have fun, ok?”

She touches my shoulder and for a minute I want to yell at her. How can she expect me to have fun or focus on making friends? There are some kids on the swim team that Kayleigh was friends with; but they’re not friends with me. Most of the time I don’t feel like talking to anybody.

She gets up to go. “Mom?” She turns around, her hand on the doorframe. “I want to donate bone marrow to Kayleigh.”

The smile falls from her face. I spent all day yesterday researching the process I’d heard them mention. I read that it’s painful, but that siblings are the best matches to donate. I read how it can save lives. The thought of a needle in my back scares me, but the alternative scares me even more.

“Cassie, do you know what that means?”
She sits back down on the bed. I tell her about my research, that I know the risks. I pull out a notebook from my backpack and start listing off facts, statistics, doctors. I turn the pages and tell her where the best hospitals in the nation are. She starts to cry, which is not what I wanted. I want her to be happy. I can help. She holds me and her cheek is wet against mine.

When she pulls back, she says, “I guess you did your homework, huh?” She sniffles and smiles at me. “I’ll have to talk it over with your dad.”

I want to tell her that it’s my decision, my body, but don’t. She hugs me again and I hug her back. In my ear she says, “You’re a brave person, Cassie, and I’m proud of you.” When she says this I know they’re going to say yes, that I’m going to be able to help save Kayleigh’s life. I get butterflies in my stomach thinking about it.

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Right before Kayleigh was diagnosed, and after her chemotherapy rounds, they took samples of her bone marrow. In preparation for my donation she tells me how they knock you out, how you don’t have to see the needle. I’ve seen the pictures online and watched the doctor television shows so I have a pretty good idea already of what it looks like, of how it’ll hurt afterwards.

The day of, Kayleigh wants to go with me but Mom and Dad make her stay at home until it’s her turn to go to the hospital. They don’t want her getting worn out. Dad takes me. We park in the structure and then walk right into the hospital as if we were visiting instead of checking in. The nurses give me a gown to change in to. I don’t know why they don’t call them smocks instead, what with the way they open in the back. I don’t want anyone to see me like that.

Dad squeezes my hand and looks as if he’s going to cry. I don’t blame him. Another one of his kids in a hospital bed.

“I’ll be right out here,” he says.
“I’ll be okay, Dad,” I tell him. I feel confident, that I can reassure him of this. “I’m doing it for Kayleigh. It’s going to work, Dad. This is it.”

He leaves and I lay down on my stomach with my arms under my head while they give me the anesthesia. I try not to think about the fact that they’ve opened the hospital gown in the back, that one of the nurses is male. The air is cool on my skin and I get goosebumps, which I hope won’t be a problem for the procedure. I think about the marrow, the stem cells they’re going to take from my body and put into my sister, who is made from the same people, out of the same stuff I am. Why did hers turn out bad and mine didn’t? What if mine still have a chance of going bad?

What I’m doing right now is active. The last thing I think is how I will push my cells into the needle, only the best ones, up, so that later they will go back down, healthy, into Kayleigh.

The weather starts to change even more. The leaves form a rainbow of yellow, orange, and red. It’s dark in the mornings when I head out to the bus.

On Saturday, a month after the heavy-dose therapy and transplant, Kayleigh is finally home from the hospital. We watch a movie in the living room and huddle under a thin blanket, her legs pressed against mine. My lower back doesn’t hurt anymore. Kayleigh says she doesn’t feel as crappy as she did when she was in the hospital. That has to mean it’s working, that she’s getting better.

When a commercial comes on, Kayleigh says, “Do you remember the putt-putt golf place we used to go to all the time?”

“You mean the one with the ice cream shop attached to it?”

“Yeah, that one. Mom and Dad used to take us there all the time. It was Dad’s way of trying to get us to be little golfers,” she smiles.
“We haven’t been there in forever.”

She stares at the TV, and then says, “Let’s go there now.”

Kayleigh sits up straight and looks excited about the prospect of going out. She passes the energy on to me, though I wonder if this is a good idea.

“Shouldn’t you just rest?” I ask. “I’m not so sure Mom or Dad would be happy about you going out.”

“They’re running errands, I’m sure they won’t mind if we take the other car.” She throws the blanket off for emphasis and sits up. “Come on, Cass, just you and me.”

I help her bundle up in a coat and hat, though it’s a beautiful day out. We write our parents a note and then head out.

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We drive through town to get to The Little Dipper. I feel my stomach lift when we move over the top of a hill, and glance over at Kayleigh to make sure she’s doing okay. She’s staring straight ahead.

I’ve only been out on the road a couple of times since I passed my driver’s test. I still feel shaky without my mom or dad sitting next to me. Kayleigh must notice how carefully I take the turns, how strictly I adhere to the speed limit.

“I miss driving,” she says. “I wish I could have been able to do it longer.” Kayleigh was only able to drive for a year after she got her license. That’s when things started to get bad, when they were worried about not only her body, but about the damage she could accidentally inflict on others. “I always wanted to go park out on Cedar Bend and make out with Eric Costeva.”

“I didn’t know you had a crush on Eric Costeva.”
“Yeah, me and every other girl in the senior class.” I look at her when she says this. Kayleigh has missed so much school she won’t be graduating with the people of her class, with the people she grew up with. She’s not even technically in the senior class anymore.

The Little Dipper is like we remember it. The course rolls up and around the flat land right on the side of busy Washtenaw Road. As the summer crowds are mostly gone, there aren’t a ton of other people here, which I’m glad about. I don’t want Kayleigh to be rushed. Inside, they give us each a colored golf ball; I pick green and Kayleigh chooses red. We get putters with the rubber peeling off the gripper tops.

Radio music plays from speakers set up on posts. Different materials divide the holes: wooden posts, bricks, rocks. You can tell that everything used to be really colorful, but all the paint and plastic has faded. The wooden posts are splintery and weatherworn.

We start moving through the course, not really caring if we get a hole in one, but just shooting in the general direction. I pretend to take wild swings and make Kayleigh laugh. The number two, formed by a thick, curling white chord, is stapled to the second hole. This isn’t the classiest put-put, but that’s why as kids we liked it.

After a couple more holes, Kayleigh says, “I need to rest for a minute.”

She slumps down to the ground and bends her knees up to her chest. I sit down next to her on the needle-like bright fake grass, and we lean against the wall separating our hole from the next. I hear Kayleigh breathing, her inhales and exhales deep and measured, like the doctor has told her to do. I should have brought a water bottle for her, or snacks to fuel up. She’s starting to look a little pale. What if she needs her medicine? What if this is too much for her?

“Are you cold? Or hot?” I ask her.

“I’m okay.”

“We probably should have had a snack before we left.”
“Cassie, I’m fine,” she says. I feel a bang as a golf ball hits the wall behind us; the player must have missed.

“But you don’t look so good.”

“I know how much I can handle. I just need a break.”

“But—”

“Cassie!” She leans her head against the wall. She takes a deep breath and I feel the air coming out of her parted lips. “I don’t think the transplant is going to work.”

“What? Why not?”

She smiles at me, fingers her golf ball. “You know I would do the same for you, right?”

“Kayleigh, what? You don’t know it’s not working.” The burning ball in my chest gets larger, and I feel it creeping into my throat, hurting.

“It’s my body. I just have a sense.” This is nothing like staying positive. This isn’t how she’s supposed to be thinking. We can’t afford this. I need her to be here.

“I don’t want you to get your hopes up.”

She looks so tired, and her eyes fill with tears. “But you’re my big sister,” I tell her, and all of a sudden we’re sobbing, clutching at one another on the course, our clubs next to us. Kayleigh squeezes me so hard her body shakes, though I can’t feel the difference in pressure.

We cry and cry until there is nothing left to come out, and even then we keep holding each other, calming down, the occasional dry heave shaking our bodies. I rest my face on her bony shoulder. We stay like that for a long time. Other players see us and stare before moving on to the next hole. They’re afraid to approach us and I’m glad. I know I could move, that we should probably get up, but I don’t want to. We rock slowly back and forth.
Finally the manager comes out and asks if we’re ok. I feel Kayleigh shiver, and I tell him we’re fine, that we’ll be leaving. He doesn’t ask if we want to finish our game. We only made it to hole ten.

“Come on, let’s get you out of here,” I say. I help Kayleigh stand up slowly and we head out of the labyrinth of holes and back to the car.

At home, I get Kayleigh in bed and give her some juice. She falls asleep almost immediately. I lie down on the floor next to her bed and stare at the ceiling fan, the blades spinning and spinning and spinning.

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Sometimes at night I lie awake imagining what her funeral will be like. I think of the speech I’ll give, how my voice will shake, but that I will bow my head and get through it. I wonder if I will be able to get through it. I wonder if Mom and Dad would let me say something. Maybe they leave all that up to the pastor. But in movies family members get to speak. I imagine my stories about Kayleigh bringing tears to people’s eyes. I will tell her like she was. I imagine them telling me how wonderful my words were, how they brought everyone peace. I wonder now what peace feels like.