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A Way In: Stories and a Novel-in-Progress

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Critical Introduction: Planned Spontaneity and Honesty in Storytelling

The fiction enclosed in this thesis is the culmination of my writing career at Ohio University. It consists of three short stories and a novel-in-progress, all set in small towns across the eastern United States, spanning from Maine to Kentucky, and told in the disparate voices of the people who live there. While the stories here are not directly unified through characters or place, they share similarities in the way they were crafted. Early in my junior year, I began discussing an idea with Professor Kevin Haworth that would shape my writing style. We called it “honesty in fiction.” The term has always been tricky to pin down, even when we knew we were encountering it. In a general sense, it pertains to the writer’s ability to convey real, nuanced emotion that develops in the context of a made-up, i.e., fictional story. Each story in this thesis strives to attain honesty by having its characters make sense of particular but surprising elements and details.

A talented writer is not synonymous with an honest writer, though the two can certainly be related. Honesty in fiction is connected to craft. It’s why we believe some stories and not others, even when they are essentially about the same things—World War II, college life, lost love. And yet to claim that honesty is strictly a matter of craft, something created word-by-word in a story debases some of the idea’s complexity, and some of its magic.

The stories included in this thesis are a product of my study of honesty in fiction. I had used the term before to describe a story, but since analyzing the concept in detail, my writing has changed. Hence I think it is a good reason to begin my
critical introduction by further explaining honesty in fiction, and why it is so important. This introduction will also establish related points about the stories in this thesis, the process of their development, and their place in the literary conversation.

I’m sitting on the porch with two of my writing friends, our own little story workshop. One of them is talking about a character of mine. “I liked this bit about him worrying that he’s not as drunk as he’d thought,” she is saying, “I could see it happening. I feel like I’ve thought that before.”

It’s then I think: more important than “Did you like it?” is “Did you believe it?”

It seems odd to make such a claim, because fiction is inherently dishonest. At the core of any reader’s desire to pick up a novel or a short story is to be taken away. And yet, we don’t want to be swept away all that far because we still want to recognize the setting, at least to some extent. Look at the Brian Jacques Redwall series. Even in a story where all the characters are animals, they still talk and act like humans. The vast majority of fiction succeeds with only the tiniest of sweeps into the realm of the make believe. Call it a “swip” even. After that initial swip, the fiction writer combats all sorts of issues in attempt to keep the reader engaged with the characters as if they were real people. “Cliché” and “over-the-top” are but two ways of a very long list that a story can lose a reader’s confidence.

I’m talking about honesty here, and a specific version of it. The storyteller’s version. The fiction world has a very different way of conveying honesty than most other artistic mediums. Lorie Moore’s story “You’re Ugly Too,” first published in
The New Yorker in 1989 and later in Best American Short Stories of the Century, demonstrates this notion:

She took a seat off to one side of the theater. She felt strangely self-conscious sitting alone, and hoped for the place to darken fast. When it did, and the coming attractions came on, she reached inside her purse for her glasses. They were in a Baggie. Her Kleenex was also in a Baggie. So were her pen and her aspirin and her mints. Everything was in Baggies. This was what she’d become: a woman alone at the movies with everything in a baggie.

The main character in “You’re Ugly Too,” Zoe Hendricks, chooses to make her way to the side of the theater. The action goes by quickly, and yet just because it’s quick does not mean it’s insignificant. The character tucks herself away from any attention she might receive from a young group of teenagers or a big family for a reason. Even when she’s done this, she still cannot shake (what the author describes as) her strange feeling of self-consciousness. The use of the word “strange” is a subtle trigger that nuances Zoe from another woman in her mid-thirties going to the movies by herself. Why should she feel strange? Because she’s the type of woman who has never felt embarrassed before? Or because Zoe is attempting to reassure herself by stating that there is nothing to be self-conscious about? People go to the movies in solitude all the time.

Normally, one might expect a character to be waiting eagerly for the movie to start, but Zoe’s case is not so simple. She wants the lights to turn off so she can be hidden from everyone, so she doesn’t have to be looked at. Who knows if she’ll even
be watching the movie? The situation she finds herself in is plausible and yet also unexpected, and that combination is a sign that the fiction is most likely succeeding as a story. This earned and specific plausibility makes space for the character’s honest understanding of herself.

Inventory also plays an important role in this scene. The physical items in Zoe’s purse solidify the awkward emotion of the occurrence, particularly the ingeniously repeated word “baggie.” Ron Carlson, in his book *Ron Carlson Writes a Story*, continually stresses “staying in the physical world” (68) as a way to establish a physical inventory for a character to access. Moore does exactly that. No broad, conclusive element outside of the theater comes to the rescue here. Instead, it’s the smaller, physical items that truly drive the emotional point forward. Zoe’s scattered baggies contribute greatly to the power of the scene, and that is because the reader has something concrete to latch onto. Any character can feel self-conscious. In an honest story, blanket emotions become nuanced ones. New, fresh components—and it’s remarkable how often these new components are strictly physical, concrete entities — transform a generic feeling into a specific, compelling one.

Zoe is on her way to finding out a truth. She has not grasped it yet (and won’t grasp it by the end of the tale, but it seems to hover above her like a low cloud). But in the meantime, the reader gets the sense that the character is on her way to discovery. The little notions inside the woman’s head are stepping-stones for us to follow, making it appear like there is no broadcast delay between reader and character as she attempts to make sense of this awkward experience at the movies. In other words, the
character comes to an understanding about herself, and the reader understands
perfectly how the consciousness gets there. We read this as honesty.

Consider the following quote by Vivian Gornick from her book *The Situation
and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*:

Truth in memoir is achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is
working hard to engage with the experience at hand. What happened to the
writer is not what matters; what matters is the large sense what the writer is
able to make of what happened.

Even though Gornick is speaking of creative nonfiction, the passage directly relates to
honesty in all writing forms, even fiction. With fiction, however, it is more often the
cracter, rather than the author who works hard to grapple with a certain experience.
Moore’s passage is a clear example of a woman trying to make sense of this
uncomfortable solo trip to the movies. Kevin Haworth, in an article from *Little
Fiction*, notes that honesty in fiction “is not about piercing truths, not about firm
conclusions. Instead, we sense honesty when we encounter a character in the process
of pursuing truth.” This scene from “You’re Ugly Too” is a good example of
Haworth’s point. The reader is not hit over the head with any stark declarations in the
dark theater. Instead, predominantly physical details guide the reader along the path
of Zoe’s thoughts. Nothing seems more honest than a woman making sense of all the
little things revolving around her world.

Honesty in fiction often comes in small doses, which eventually leads to larger
revelations over the course of the story. This next, briefer example comes from
Raymond Carver’s “Where I’m Calling From” first published in his collection
*Cathedral*, and later, also in *Best American Short Stories of the Century*:

It rained last night. The clouds are banked up against the hills across the valley.

J.P. clears his throat and looks at the hills and the clouds. He pulls his chin.

Then he goes on with what he is saying.

Carver’s writing lacks embellishment. He achieves an intimacy with the reader with short, simple sentences. Even when he’s being figurative (banked up against the hills, pulls his chin), he does it in subtle, camouflaged way, substituting a less common verb for one that does not make complete literal sense yet the reader understands perfectly.

Ron Carlson, also from his book *Ron Carlson Writes a Story*, sheds more light on how even changing one word can benefit a story greatly:

> We want to create a space, a set that has at least some fresh facet, a single radical element that will anchor the place as being real. This doesn’t involve far out thinking [...] but more commonly a simple touch that transcends the generic (72).

It doesn’t take much, says Carlson, and the idea is very evident in Carver’s writing. “Where I’m Calling From” stays away from a term one commonly hears in the realm of stories: “over the top.” Carver’s decision to replace one commonplace verb with a figurative, fresh one is enough to grab the reader’s attention. The writer holds a delicate seal of authenticity before the reader’s eyes. One innovatively expressed but plausible gesture like the pulling of a chin helps establish this seal. Too many, and the seal is broken.
It bears emphasizing that honesty should not be confused with banality. To be honest means to be original and avoiding clichés. Francine Prose, in her craft book *Reading Like a Writer*, defines an honest gesture as “an individual’s very particular response to a particular event” (210). In other words, as Prose goes on to explain, if a man is nervous about getting married on his wedding day, he may in actuality straighten his tie, run his hands through his hair. But these sorts of gesture are the obvious options. They’re overused. The honest writer picks a gesture that is yes, believable, but also significant and new. It should illuminate something about the character. And, if a “stock gesture” is used, it should be used in a non-stock way. For instance, the gesture of a woman lovingly grabbing her husband’s hand on the couch may have warrant if she is a character who’s not inclined to do such a thing.

Prose also goes on to note that “language—that is, word choice—can often function as gesture” (210). Hence J.P. looking out at the hills and pulling his chin is a good example of an honest gesture because it not only makes physical sense to the reader, but is also rendered in fresh language. The reader believes the character of J.P. now, because he’s distanced himself from other everyday troubled alcoholics who may run their hands through a mess of greasy hair. Once again, the cleverly chosen detail resonates with and convinces the reader.

A story in this thesis, “Broken Glass,” attempts to achieve a similar, small dose of honesty in the initial description of one of its main characters. Here, instead of an honest gesture, we might call it an honest description. Set at a college party, the story
is told in the perspective of a student, Joe, who’s talking to another student, Kaleena, amongst the drunkenness. The description of Kaleena, in the first draft, went like this:

*She smiles at him, revealing bright, white teeth that contrast with her dark skin.*

Here is the newer rewrite of her:

*She smiles, revealing white, miraculous teeth.*

More important than attempting to describe a character’s physicality all at once is focusing on one solid and fresh trait or gesture. Kaleena’s “miraculous” teeth is a fresh phrase, much more appealing than the initial character description. Once again, as Prose has stated, honesty in fiction can often boil down to word choice. By reading that the teeth are miraculous, the reader has already picked up on the implication that they are white. Now, the trait is accomplishing two things at once. It is supplying necessary information while also establishing a sense of honest description because it has distanced itself from cliché.

Additionally, since the story is told in Joe’s perspective, the reader gathers that he is attracted to Kaleena, without having to say it directly. The improved description of Kaleena makes her a much more vivid character, while also indicating, subtly, that Joe is grappling with his own physical desires. When gestures, traits—these subtle triggers that can establish a sense of honesty—are multifunctional and also serve as a connection between characters, it’s easier to understand the emotional power pulsing through a story.

It also bears emphasizing that omitting the detail of her dark skin does not mean the description is forever lost. It may get included in another part of the story, or
it may simply be part of the writer’s world which the reader never explicitly sees yet senses just below the surface or off the page. Kaleena’s dark skin already creates a tributary of other possible character traits. Maybe she goes to a tanning salon a lot. Or maybe she is a soccer player who spends a lot of time outside. While perhaps only one detail is chosen to be present in the text, the others still matter because they help shape a character. If the writer doesn’t have an intimate and genuine understanding of his or her character, then figuring out the right decision that character is going to make will prove to be difficult.

Taking a step back, we’ve established the unique, carefully-chosen character description or gesture as one method of conveying honesty in a story, but there’s an important question that manifests itself in the discussion of this broader idea. Why does honesty remain so important? After all, it is an art that relies on invention and imagination. Kevin Haworth notes from *Little Fiction* that in a story, “we have no expectation of truth, in a literal way. That’s part of what we appreciate about fiction—it demonstrates just how capable humans are of creating, inventing, embellishing.” So if *literal truth* is not the honesty we are looking for, what about the last three words in the quote—creating, inventing, and embellishing? What connection does the imagination have with honesty?

This link is emotion. If a story does not evoke emotion in its reader, then it has not done its job. Yes, a good story isn’t technically “true,” but the emotions which revolve around it are. This is where honesty comes into play—it is the process of delivering that emotion to the reader. Without honesty, we don’t truly believe the
characters and events of the tale. Without that belief, we do not feel it. A million stories exist about murder, breakups, college life, etc. and as most of us learn in high school English class, there are really only three fundamental conflicts: person versus person, person versus himself or herself, and person versus nature. Hence, what makes a story succeed is execution. Every writer wants their story to induce laughter or sadness or anger or an abundance of other emotions, but this is a difficult task. After all, a story is just a piece of paper with words on it. There are no visuals or background music to help the writer out in the attempt at engagement of the reader. And beyond that, we have to remember that a story is inherently a lie.

A sense of honesty is what removes these obstacles. It’s what makes the reader come to understand and empathize with what the character is grappling with. It is perhaps the most fundamental way a writer can solicit the reader’s investment in the story.

As we establish the points of craft that relate to honesty in fiction, it is also important to look more broadly at a scene as it evolves in an honest way. The following comes from the story in this thesis, “Broken Glass,” featuring the previously mentioned characters Joe and Kaleena:

Joe passes a beer pong table on the porch and walks out into a misty rain.

Scattered kids talk on the lawn. It must be ten degrees colder than when he arrived. Where’s my liquor blanket? He thinks, starting to worry that he’s not as drunk as he thought. He holds onto the hope that he won’t remember any of this in the morning.
This scene shares a similarity with the scene from “You’re Ugly Too.” Both Zoe’s and Joe’s consciousnesses go to a place that is unexpected but plausible. A good story succeeds if it surprises its reader. It fails if it shocks the reader into disbelief. As writers, we want our characters to act in outrageous ways, think extreme thoughts. This is the basis for entertainment in a story. Yet, they cannot do these things if the actions are not warranted. An apt question a writer should ask when crafting a story is: “how can my character think or act in a way that makes little sense outside of the text, but within it, perfect sense?” Honesty in fiction makes the reader understand, emotionally as well as situationally, the character’s bizarre thoughts and actions. Through the writing, plausibility manifests itself.

The situation Moore’s character finds herself in is a very specific, delightful one: alone at the movies, baggies of supplies all around her. It is from this spot that her thought sprouts organically: she just wants the theater to darken so no one will see her. The reader does not expect it and yet once we read it, it appears to be the perfect thought for this context, the right fit for this world.

Joe, walking up and out from the party and desperately pleading for the alcohol to work as a memory-loss spell, is my attempt to create a character whose desires are both understandable and yet also unexpected. The reader arrives at these significant thoughts of the characters via smaller beats of honesty, in hope that the story will eventually lead to a greater sense of it, a larger honesty than the individual parts.

In both cases, the desperate thoughts are very much intertwined with the physical happenings of the story. Emotions are nuanced by items and circumstances.
One could say the woman in the theater is feeling self-conscious or the college-aged
guy is feeling anxiety, but both statements reduce the emotional complexity of what is
occurring on the page. There is always the subtle but constant reminder of the
physical world meshed within a character’s thought.

This close reading of a section of Moore’s story in conjunction with my own
hopefully suggests that honest writing pertains to a seemingly realistic evolution of
conflict. The goal remains to have characters act in seemingly strange, tragic, or
ridiculous ways that appear extremely justified within the text. We want the
characters to act desperately, but the moment their actions appear unearned is the
moment the reader stops believing the story. The writer has to show the consciousness
getting there. This does not mean spelling out every thought of the character for the
reader. In her scene, all Moore uses is one mention of uneasiness, a dark theater, and a
bunch of baggies. Yet, by the end of the passage, she has succeeded in drawing us
fully into the story.

The second section of this critical introduction addresses an equally important
idea I’ve encountered in writing fiction, which is certainly related to the first. While
the previous section’s main focus was mostly conceptual and dealt with what honesty
looked like in a story, this next part will practically speak to fiction’s organic nature,
and how I’ve misunderstood it for much of my writing life. Not coincidentally, it’s
my belief that a lot of young writers suffer from the same misconception, and it boils
down to this: plotting and planning a story are entirely different things. While one
prohibits real spontaneous creation, the other does just the opposite, lending itself to prompting the characters to act and respond in bizarre, unique, and yet understandable ways.

It cannot be stressed enough that accomplishing both plausibility and gripping conflict is an extremely difficult task. Many informative, wonderfully written books on craft suggest that the evolution of a story unfolds on its own quite easily. Ron Carlson notes in *Ron Carlson Writes a Story* that “to write a story is to stay alert and open to the possibilities that emerge as each sentence cuts its way into the unknown. In writing we ‘find’ the story” (14). I agree with Carlson—a story is meant to unravel naturally, not be pried apart by the writer in a manipulative manner. And yes, if a writer charts out every story’s event into a plot-line, the conflict will most likely feel unearned and stale. And yet, another significant point often gets overlooked by many aspiring story writers: like honesty, “finding” has its own very specific definition in the fiction world. One must be careful not to attach an attitude of inactivity to the “finding a story” process, because few writers randomly uncover all the elements of a story as they type on a computer. While we cannot pry apart a story, we also cannot abandon it to the idea that in time it will find cohesion all by itself. Finding a story requires not only a keen alertness while writing, but also a dedication to filling in the space that exists outside of the text itself. This space is what prompts characters to act, to cause conflict, to respond to their surroundings and eventually construct plot.

Plot exists, but like theme, it is a reader’s term, something to be examined once the story has been set down on the page. The writer’s much more pressing issues are
character and place—the major components that make up a world. Every good story, whether a 1,000 page novel or a piece of flash fiction, exists in its own specific world.

A story from this thesis, “From the Back of the Room,” began with an initial situational spark—a large man, Isaiah Kearns, watches an old high school crush, Kelly Barnes, at a strip club. She doesn’t know he’s there, or at least that’s what he thinks. To me, the writer, the idea possessed a charged inherent conflict that I was very curious to unravel. The story begins in an iconic place, a place with all sorts of viewpoints floating around it. Additionally, the main character immediately finds himself oscillating between a noble, protective, disillusioned love and a more seemingly debased lust. The character’s thoughts and emotions teeter back and forth, and perhaps they symbolize many people’s (including my own) uneasy and uncertain attitude towards strip bars. All of these factors about the premise intrigued me, and so from the first line I wrote, with the belief that all would work itself out in the magical process of spontaneous creative writing.

There’s a time for writing without any sort of plan, and perhaps for some, it is the method that works best. Yet, writers like Carlson, who stress how harmful the idea of plot can be in the early stages of a story, are often misunderstood in the sense that not all stories easily unfurl upon the computer screen.

As stated, the “finding the story” philosophy should never carry the implication of inactivity. The job of the writer is not simply to write or serve as the middleman between inspiration and rhetoric. This thesis is a testament to the fact that story writing is a complicated process that vastly transcends these misconceptions
about the writer’s role in a story. Our main job is to develop a world where the story can grow in the best and truest way possible. We do not manipulate it, but we also do not leave it alone. We prompt it into action, and if we know its parts, it’s then that fiction’s organic nature takes over.

The initial draft of “From the Back of the Room,” was written in an impulsive manner. With the initial situation in mind, I began the attempt of navigating a foggy and inchoate world. The result was a first draft home to characters that seemed to drift through the story. The decisions they made felt unearned and underwhelming, backed up by little emotional charge. In this first draft, Isaiah slowly becomes part of their family, helping both Kelly and her daughter, Colleen, with their respective problems. The climax comes when Colleen doesn’t want to move away to Cincinnati, throwing a fit. Isaiah watches as Kelly smack her daughter once on the mouth, shutting her up. He then feels much uncertainty about what his role is in this moment. Eventually the three of them move away from Augusta and live comfortably.

In an attempt to write in a manner of fresh spontaneity but no planning, the first draft actually resembled a story that appeared to have been heavily plotted, spanning several years. The finished version of “From the Back of the Room,” by contrast, spans roughly a month. This new, shorter time frame reflects my better knowledge of the characters and place. I was now able to picture and imagine how each character would act in a zoomed focus, in a carefully selected small batch of scenes.
Both drafts begin the same way, told in the voice of its main character, Isaiah, at the strip club:

To get to Scoundrel’s you had to leave our quaint, modest town of Augusta, cross the river and head off towards that hole of Blue-Ash, Ohio. That's where I’d go to watch Kelly. It was a shabby bar shamefully tucked away from other buildings, with just a small stage and a couple of poles.

As stated, after this expositional paragraph, the two drafts take very different paths. In the first scene of the first draft, Isaiah spends his time hiding in the back of the room until he eventually sneaks out, avoiding the gaze of Kelly. This initial passivity set the tone for an unearned evolution of conflict through the rest of the story. Looking back, it’s a great example of why planning is so important.

Unplanned stories lead to passive characters. Constructing a specific world will help cultivate the conflict. There is a reason Isaiah and Kelly never run into each other at Scoundrel’s Bar in the initial draft of the story. At the time, I did not know them well enough, and because of that, there existed a subconscious fear of having them interact with each other in the first scene.

Of course, the writer gets to know the characters and watch them grow as pages are written. Yet there is a danger in having a main character who can only be described using adjectives set out on journey without more planning. It is often said that characters are meant to surprise the writer, and once again, this is true. Yet how can they surprise us if we do not already know and understand them deeply in the first place?
The Isaiah Kearns of the first draft of “From the Back of the Room” was a large man who used to play high school basketball and never left his hometown of Augusta, Kentucky. By the next draft, I had added that he’d gone to one year of college. I knew why he’d dropped out. I knew his major, his position on the basketball team, his favorite players. Additionally, I’d noted that Kelly loved English class in the first draft. By the start of the next, prompted by Professor Haworth, I knew the five most recent books she had checked out at her local library. I still had no idea what was going to happen in the end of my story, yet I did know that these now much more developed and fuller characters were going to meet earlier on, the first scene in fact, where Isaiah believes he is safe from view in the back of the bar, but soon finds out he is not.

The point to be made here is that even if we read a story linearly, we tend not to write them that way. The creation of a story should be viewed spherically. Before worrying about how the second draft of the story was going to unfold, I wrote about the characters, events that had occurred earlier in their life, told in their voice. My discoveries of Isaiah and Kelly did not come strictly via character charts and notes, but by freely exploring any part of them I was curious or unknowledgeable about. Here is where writing without a plan is important. This practice began to fill a space that would eventually help procreate a line of events called plot.

The story finds the right route to take through a richly developed sphere of possibilities. The more vivid and detailed the world is, the easier the story will unravel. Kelly’s five books or Kaleena’s dark skin are never explicitly included in this
thesis, yet they were significant in the sense that they brought the characters to life and allowed them to ultimately make the truest decisions in their respective stories, the decisions that eventually created emotional charge and meaning.

While an emphasis on the knowing of characters is one facet of planning a story, setting is an equally important factor that rounds and embellishes a world. The opening scene of a story from this thesis, “Shipyards,” functions around a detailed, planned setting. The house in which the Crowe family lives is based on a real house, one that exists outside of the text itself. The setting was vivid to me, and so it lent itself to a distinctive account of what might happen if a mother never comes home one wintry night:

The sound of her dad rummaging through the kitchen drawers meant he was thinking about it too. […] He seemed to continue to his search around the kitchen because he was on display, trying to appease the eyes of a young girl wondering where her mother was. The same phone book had been flipped through twice, papers above the fridge taken down and examined.

Ron Carlson once again sheds light on how a grounded setting helps move the story forward the right way: “Place is the fabric and the instrument that are going to help you find out what is going to happen” (73). A setting that makes the writer feel confident will prompt the characters to act upon it naturally. Knowing the people as well the place compels the story to function in an organic matter. Carlson continues along this same vein: “We write to find out what happened and—if we’re careful about the discovery process, typing with true attention—then we end up creating real
characters worthy of belief” (56). Not only does the writer need to possess an extreme awareness in the process of writing, but she or he also needs a preliminary, always growing world that exists outside of the text. Contrary to common belief, the writer does have a role in creating what will eventually be known as plot, and that is to prompt its characters into action via already known information, geography, mindsets, etc. Of course, there is always room for creation, but the more prior, adaptable knowledge the writer possesses, the better.

Even an action as subtle as flipping through a phone book repeatedly in “Shipyards” already begins to create vivid characters and a story thread that has begun to gain momentum. Wendy Crowe wants her father to do something to remedy the situation, and so he acts even though both characters as well as the readers know it is futile. Eventually, the scene leads to the father and daughter staring out the window, anxiously waiting for the third member of the family to return, united in their helplessness. Without inventory, the right physical happenings, which solidify necessary tension, are lost.

When scenes evolve from the imagined matter of a story’s world, it is only then that they become part of the plot. Once the plot has been established, readers analyze it in the search for themes. Susan Sontag in her speech “At the Same Time: The Novelist and Moral Reasoning,” part of the Nadine Gordimer Lecture, had this to say about the writer’s role regarding theme:

A great writer of fiction both creates—through acts of imagination, through language that feels inevitable, through vivid forms—a new world, a world that
is unique, individual; and responds to a world, the world the writer shares with other people but is unknown or mis-known by still more people (211).

Notice that Sontag is clear to solidify the writer’s first obligation of creation. Once a world has been established, it’s only then that characters, and through them, the writer, respond to a world. In this organic space, specifics themes eventually come to be.

For example, only after the world of “From the Back of Room” began to fill out—did themes materialize. The relationship between Isaiah and Kelly is a complicated one. At times, Isaiah seems controlled strictly by a carnal desire in his pursuing of Kelly, and yet other times, he appears to be infuriated by men’s lust. His thoughts were not the same as my thoughts would be in that situation—they came about in response to the actions taking place in the story. In this sense, my story is a response to not only to its precise setting, but perhaps to the issue of a small town strip bar and the people who attend them. It is not the writer’s job to take a stance on controversial questions—it is to nuance such questions with one specific example.

Now, finished with “From the Back of the Room,” I am proud to include it in my thesis because the themes that revolve around the story formed naturally. Is it immoral for men to attend strip clubs? Does Isaiah’s thought ring true that even though there are technically male strip bars, this does not reconcile what many strippers like Kelly go through? Or is his concluding fantasy in which he dances in front of Kelly meant to be ridiculous, a man’s disillusioned thought that only reinforces the role of the woman as the dancer, the one who is more responsible for
sexual arousal? Or does his thought symbolize a genuine attempt at gender equality in regards to this small issue?

When I began writing “From the Back of the Room,” I had no idea these were the thematic questions this story would ultimately ask. They were not forced or contrived by plot. Reflecting Sontag’s observation, they were an organic response to events that developed within a world that I had created.

The issues discussed earlier in this critical introduction also play a significant role in the first seventy pages of my novel-in-progress, A Way In, which makes up the second part of my creative writing thesis. Though I have only completed six chapters of what will one day be a full novel, themes have already begun to emerge organically, drawn from keen attention to detail and the characters’ response to an imaginatively decorated world.

The story takes place in Logan, Ohio, one very much inspired by the real, nearby town, and yet also fictionalized to fit the parameters of what I’d set out to write. The main characters, Jimmy and Joanie Atwater, are fraternal twins, both sophomores at Logan High School. They’ve lived in the quiet, sylvan town all their lives, and carry bitterness towards some of their newly arrived peers, who’ve taken residence in the fancy, recently constructed developments. In this sense, my version of Logan reflects elements of my own childhood in a developing suburb—particularly the memory of witnessing the gradual consumption of woods I’d walked in many times. In exchange for the beloved trees, these much larger and more intimidating houses
than my own loomed only a few streets over, all part of a unified club labeled “Still Meadow,” or “Waterford Woods.”

Here Jimmy and Joanie navigate this quaint but growing town. While Joanie, who plays both tennis and basketball, is content with her busy, hectic high school life, Jimmy comes to resist acclimating himself to the norms of everybody else at school. He is disinterested in after school sports, the monotony of classes, even maintaining his friend group, for the most part. Instead, he buries himself deep inside the fantasy tales he reads and the forests he walks.

As the story progressed, it became to clear to me that Jimmy’s character was attempting to address the aspect of supernatural in young adult literature. The young adult genre is filled with elements of otherworldliness. Certain works like *The Lord of the Rings* completely separate themselves from the real world, while others, *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Harry Potter* being two famous examples, work as a hybrid between ordinary life and the spectacular. Much of young adult literature is arguably governed by some facet of the unreal, if not always by a full-fledged, wondrous escape. In my novel, I wanted to stay entirely within the borders of the realistic, and yet speak to some of the famous characters who are transported through a picture frame or a wardrobe into some new amazing realm. In other words, *A Way In* follows the tradition of its fantastical predecessors not because of what happens in the story, but because of the lens through which it’s told: a realistic story told in the point-of-view of a boy obsessed with fantasy.
Some of the questions suggested by this choice include: how do adolescents reconcile themselves to the fact that fantasy only exists in books and movies? What sorts of conflict occur when certain people refuse to believe this fact? Jimmy, Joanie and a few of their friends stumble upon small-scale corruption in their small town, involving one of their favorite teachers. While Joanie and the rest of the group respond with remote interest in some of these shady dealings, Jimmy finds himself immersed in this opportunity for adventure. Even when the situation appears to be dangerous, deterring the other students from investing further, real-world warnings mean nothing to Jimmy, a kid who’s been waiting for magical portals to appear all his life.

Yet only half of the chapters in A Way In are narrated by Jimmy. The other half is told via Joanie’s world, one who somewhat understands where her brother is coming from. Nevertheless, she worries about Jimmy’s inability to accept or invest anything in the life he lives during high school. The adventures he lives vicariously through books and his walks in the woods are elements of her past she has long grown out of. The only times the reader witnesses Joanie behaving like her twin brother are in flashbacks provided by Jimmy, who looks back on them with fond remembrance.

I have chosen to present her side of the story using third-person narrative so as to accentuate the difference between their worldviews. Equally as important as the plot points themselves are the ways in which characters perceive and react to what transpires in the story. Since one portrayal in A Way In is exaggerated in a wistful, obsessed-with-the-otherworldly manner, I wanted there to be a second account that
casts the events of the story in a slightly more objective tone. This is not to say the 
third-person presentation of Joanie dials down her own voice, but rather supplies an 
additional sense of pragmatism to it, which certainly reflects her character. Her side 
of the story provides a juxtaposition that signifies a certain amount of unreliability in 
Jimmy’s telling, especially as he is drawn deeper and deeper into his own world.

While only a section of the novel is attached in this thesis, it’s a section that 
establishes the foundation of a world I look forward to exploring further. The two 
siblings are characters that formed not only by means of ruminations over this novel, 
but from other short stories I’ve written here at Ohio University. I’ve grown to know 
them well, the place they live in, the friends they hang around with, the parents they 
love and are slightly embarrassed of. With a firm base for this early part of the novel 
to stand on, I’m confident the story will progress in a manner of keeping with the 
skills and principles of writing fiction that I have learned in my career as a student in 
the Honors Tutorial College at Ohio University.

I hope this reflection on honesty in fiction and how theme evolves organically 
has illuminated the motivations behind and the development of these three stories and 
the section of a novel. While they may take place in different towns far away from 
each other, skirting along the line between fiction and fact, they are united in their 
striving to create characters who convey genuine emotion as they respond to their own 
specific worlds.
Works Cited


From the Back of the Room
I.

To get to Scoundrel’s you had to leave our quaint, modest town of Augusta, cross the river and head off towards that hole of Blue-Ash, Ohio. That's where I’d go to watch Kelly. It was a shabby bar shamefully tucked away from other buildings, with just a small stage and a couple of poles. Someone always wanted to get on Kelly, their mouth ajar, not sure what to do with their hands other than grab their beer. I don't blame them, the way she moved. “Best ass in Bracken County” I’d heard them say. But there's a difference between wanting and trying.

There were three types of men who came into Scoundrel’s. There were the boys, ones I recognized from Augusta, just turned eighteen, sweaty singles in their hands like they thought it was Chuck E Cheese. There were the stubble-faced veterans who wore lots of denim, more subdued than the young ones, their carelessness replaced by something else, shame maybe. And then there were the suited ones, middle-aged, who came all the way from Cinci so they could be anonymous.

I looked at the sleeves of my old dress shirt, rolled up to reveal big hairy forearms. My senior year, I’d led the league in rebounding for the whole state of Kentucky. I had to remind myself of that sometimes, how my size was an asset, that it’d done good things, because often it just made me feel claustrophobic. Could Kelly see me hunched all the way in the back, through the smoke and the flaky lights? I know I could see her—the dark gypsy eyes, and the thick, messy black hair. Or was it memory helping out? Either way, I shifted in my seat to hide my erection.
Her routine lasted twenty minutes, and then it was working tables, talking with some dazed young boys. They laughed a lot, and eventually got another dance. I hated it but I couldn’t help imagining myself in their place. Finally, she moved on, talking, flirting, making money, and the whole time I couldn’t stop looking. I should have known better, because at one point she looked my way, and suddenly I felt like Jimmy Stewart in *Rear Window* when he’s finally eyed by the murderer. I couldn’t be sure if our gazes met each other or if she’d looked beyond me, perhaps at the bartender or the exit door. I looked at the dirty wood of the table like it was a math problem. I wanted to be invisible. What was I doing here? There could be nothing worse than running into an old crush here, alone and embarrassed, smelling of sweat.

“You look lonely,” a voice said.

I glanced up like a teenager watching *The Shining* behind a blanket.

It wasn’t Kelly. It was a young, delicate, barely-clothed girl covered in makeup, and even with heels on stood no taller than 5 foot 5. I tried to picture her face without all the powders and gunk but couldn’t. It’s funny—you can always tell when somebody’s nervous. Always. You can say the right things like “you look lonely” and I could have said “not any more” or something like that but none of it would’ve mattered because our eyes met and in that one or two seconds we both knew that the other was uncomfortable. She was probably newly employed here and what she needed was a man who was sure of himself and wanted a lap dance, who would have smiled and said “come on over here honey,” showing her the ropes. I was not this man—I was powered by the complete love Father John was always talking about in
his sermons, and this girl, who had so much makeup on she almost looked like a mime, would not fulfill it.

But she was still here and I’d lost Kelly on my radar. “I’m all right, thanks,” I said and she moved on, her face lost. She seemed to be having a long day. A more self-confident me could have politely touched her shoulder and said “take a seat” and we could have had a few beers.

Now Kelly stood right in front of me.

How ridiculous it was to have her standing here in a tiny black top and thong and me in blue jeans and a dress shirt. I have to imagine that men don’t normally go to clubs where they know the strippers from their outside life. The last time I’d sat at a table while Kelly stood before me was in our high school cafeteria, her probably in an Eryka Badu hoodie and me in my letterman jacket with my last name on the back. Now, I was dressed more like a man and she might as well have been naked. And there had been no keeping in touch for almost six years. Imagine that scene and tell me it wouldn’t be the most surreal and embarrassing thing you’ve ever experienced.

Kelly though, was not like me, or the short young stripper. I’d never seen her fazed or embarrassed. She always seemed to tower over you, and you couldn’t help but marvel at how strong she was built. I willed myself not to look at her thick, dark, muscular legs.

I said her name with a slight state of shock, as if we’d passed each other at the post office, and she did the same. Drinkers walked by us. Even with all the shouts and laughs and Aerosmith on the jukebox I swear I could hear the neon light buzzing
behind me like a dragonfly. All I did was sit there while she stood. We maintained a
distance between us as if we were magnets of the same charge.

“Do you want a dance?” she asked.

“What?”

“A dance, would you like one?” There was no smirk on her face.

“No, I…uh…can’t,” I said.

“Just here to watch then?” She spoke as if she was discussing the weather.

“No. Well, yes. Just you though.”

“Just me, huh?” She angled her gaze at me and in this craze I realized I’d have
to start explaining myself or she’d pass me by and that’s how she’d remember me.
Isaiah Kearns, that big shy kid from Augusta High School, who came and sat in the
back of the room and spied on her while she moved her body.

“I heard you moved back into town,” I said, looking away. I wanted to sip my
beer but couldn’t move my hand.

“Yeah, about three months ago,” she said.

“I heard you were working here and it’s the only place I knew to look for you.”

“It’s a small town, Zay. You could’ve run into me alotta places.”

“I know, you’re right,” I said. “I just, I’m not sure. My papaw said he’d heard
about it and I wasn’t running into you is all and I wanted to see you.”

She looked around the place and I could tell she was thinking there was more
money to be made at another table. “Tell me the truth,” she said. “This the first time
you come here?”
“Sure is.”

She gave a tiny smirk, just on the right side of her face. “Bull shit,” she said.

“I’ve seen you in the back before.”

Of course she did, I thought. I’m as big as an ogre. How could you miss me?

“Well then how come you’d never talked to me before?” I asked.

Her dark, thick eyebrows rose at me and it made me feel even more embarrassed. She was going to leave so I swung for the fences.

“Go out with me sometime,” I said. It was a mix between a statement and a question.

Finally, a shot had fallen. A three-point heave. She was thinking.

“Okay,” she said.

Then she asked if I knew about the kid. A daughter named Colleen. Col, for short. I said yes, I did know, and this was the truth.

II.

My senior year of high school I was in Kelly’s English class. We’d been reading *Huck Finn* and there was an essay contest and the winner got a Bee Hive gift card, and I remember she’d won. Her essay was called “The River in *Huck Finn*.” I loved watching her discuss books in class because when I’d see her later with her friends she wouldn’t talk that way—I don’t think they liked it. For that hour though, she was on fire, and instead of making my own comments I was just the supplier of emphatic “umm-hums” to her wisdom.
I’ll have you know—I’m no ignoramus. I went to Morehead State for a year. Studied Film. And I like a good book. But in class with Kelly, I just couldn’t keep my ideas straight.

The sun was starting to dip behind the hills. It was our first date since I’d seen her at the strip club. We were walking down Main Street, en route to the General Store for soft serve. Augusta didn’t have a Dairy Queen. I asked her early on what she’d been reading lately and she told me a long list of books to check out, beginning with *A People’s History of the United States* and a book of Tupac lyrics.

*Sword of Shannara* was sitting on my nightstand, but I didn’t tell her this.

We passed window shoppers and families and they looked at us, eager to know more, and I smiled back at them, swelling with pride. There was a refreshing breeze from the river and it cooled me off. I thanked God I wasn’t sweating badly.

“Best thing to do with kids is get em reading,” Kelly said. “We don’t have cable at home. We did in Ohio.” She paused for a second, just enough for me to know she was thinking about some aspect of her life up there. “I’m glad Col never watched it much. She was pretty little, I guess. Still is.”

I agreed with her, and got to thinking what the heck I would do with a child. High school didn’t seem far off, and neither did my one year of college.

Morehead State University’s practice gym was always too hot. Even during shoot-around I looked like I’d just taken a dip in the swimming pool next door. “Swamp ass,” they called me. It made me self-conscious—I can’t tell you how
many layups I missed because there was a nervous twitch in my arm or my palms were too sweaty.

“Was he really the leading high school rebounder in the state?” I heard the question muttered in the locker room a lot.

There were twenty of us on the roster. I looked at the stat sheet once, the one that listed all of our heights and weights, and realized seven of my teammates were bigger than me. At six feet five inches I’d been the biggest player on my high school team besides Eddie Pailes, but he was a stick. Now, on this new team, I was average power forward size at best. “Whatcha lack in size, you make up for in tenacity,” my Papaw always said, but I just didn’t believe him anymore. Augusta was two hours away from Morehead. It was like I’d forgotten all of my ferociousness in my hometown. On the court, I felt like a chunky gargoyle statue.

“You’ll get your chance, Isaiah,” my coach had said to me one day when he knew I was down about not getting much playing time. Isaiah, he’d said, not Zay, and all without even looking at me, focused on his notebook scribbled to the brim with full-court presses and out-of-bounds plays.

And it was the same sort of line my advisor gave me, her big paper-covered desk between us. I’d gone to talk with her about maybe pink-slipping into a film class. “After all, it is my major,” I’d said. I hated all those gen-ed classes you had to take first. There were only so many equations I could stare at before I said screw this.

“We have to save those spots for the upperclassmen,” she’d said. “Be patient, Isaiah. You’ll get your shot.”
Embarrassment began to creep into me now, walking down Main Street with Kelly. I was 24. Besides my year away, I’d lived in Augusta my whole life, in the same home, working the same job at Clopay Plastics. I still played ball a lot in my driveway and went on hiking trips with friends who had stayed around. There were a lot of them. But Kelly had left not long after our graduation with some older man, and now, six years later, you could sense the faraway places on her.

“Hey Zay,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“How come you never asked me out in school?” She paused. “Why now?”

I thought about Scoundrel’s and my face heated up. “Well,” I said, dragging it out, thinking. “You were always so outgoing, I was just intimidated I guess. When I’d heard you’d come back…I’m not sure. I’m sorry about this. I’m sorry I came and watched you like that.”

She just laughed at me, making me feel a little better, and asked if I wanted to split a twelve pack. We drank them in my car looking out at the river.

“I feel guilty,” she said, after she’d had a few. “I was high all the time when Col was a baby, holding her, feeding her. We both were. I hate to say this but a lot of it seems like a hazy dream.”

I just sat there and let her talk, feeling a little helpless. Kelly meanwhile seemed to be trying to remember something. I wanted to put my arm around her, but resisted. If she just wanted to talk about the past, that was okay with me. When we’d
bought the beer I couldn’t help but think excitedly about us stumbling and falling over each other, but now I felt guilty for it.

“I’d planned on getting an abortion,” she was saying. “I even went to the clinic, twice. I’d filled out the paper work, they’d run a couple tests, and I was sitting there in the waiting room and then I just left.”

The sun had gone down beneath the hills. A barge passed by us, sending strange patches of unwanted light on us, making me think of old interrogation scenes from the movies. To lighten the mood, I thought about saying: “where were you on September the 8th, 1942?” like I was Humphrey Bogart from _The Maltese Falcon_ but I didn’t.

“You know how people talk about suicide?” Kelly was saying. “And how the thought of it isn’t all that bad? Even inviting?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Like an easy way out.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “But then you hear a lot of people say when the moment came and it was time to pull the trigger, or jump off the bridge, whatever…well they couldn’t do it.”

“Totally,” I said.

“It’s like anybody else I guess. When it came down to it I just couldn’t. I needed like a… personal assistant—someone to hypnotize me beforehand. Keep me under the spell for a week after it was over too.”

Early on in the date, I remember thinking that we could have still been in high school, talking about stealing a six pack from our parents’ fridge, feeling the silly
electricity in our voices. Now, in the car, the can felt too familiar in my palm. I have to say, Kelly’s story was starting to bring me down some.

“Guilt is useless,” I found myself saying. “These thoughts are only gonna make things worse.”

My words didn’t do much—there’s no way they could have done much. But maybe it was the act of trying that made her rest her head on my shoulder. I tried to calm my thumping heart, my watering mouth.

“I’ve hit her too,” she said quietly. “I’ll never forget that.”

Her saying that took the desire right away from me, at least for little while. I wondered if she was going to cry, but she didn’t.

I drove her back soon after that and said goodbye and we kissed, just for a second. I watched her open the thin door of the trailer and enter. There were trailers like this one all around, with dim yellow light seeping out of little windows. It was a part of town I never went. I wondered if Colleen was in there, sleeping in the dark. She had to be in there. Where else would she be?

Driving back, I turned on the radio and sang to Dave Matthews, even the notes I couldn’t hit. I pictured myself easily bettering their lives, like a piggy-back ride was all it took. I thought about this as I came into the center of town and parked in my driveway. Inside, the house was quiet—even the muffled snores of Papaw were soothing. I lay down in bed and thought about the kiss, and before I knew it the image of Kelly dancing had snuck up on me. Somehow I was able to cut her out of Christie’s like it was a picture and paste her in the quiet dimness of my bedroom, right in front of
my Back to the Future poster. Her hair swayed while her hips slowly shook, all in harmony, just for me.

III.

Two months later, we were eating dinner in her trailer. The lights had been dimmed because Kelly was getting a migraine. Silverware clanked subtly. Col was complaining that she wanted Mac and Cheese.

Kelly said she wouldn’t hear another word about the food and that Col would eat it. This rarely worked, from what I’d seen so far.

“I’ll make it, I promise,” Col said.

“You’re too short to reach the microwave,” I said, admiring her determination.

I’d put together a salad. Kelly’d cooked a chicken. Col was nibbling on the meat but hadn’t touched any of what I’d made.

“You’re insulting Zay, Col. He’s brought over food and this is how you repay him?”

“It’s gross.” She put her fork down on the table, giving up for now.

“No need to say sorry,” I said. “I was missing some key ingredients, you see.

Don’t know what they were, but I was missing um.”

“Sometimes you have to suck it up and eat it,” Kelly said, and then caught herself, adding: “not that the salad is one of those things.”

I smiled at her and thought about how I rarely cooked for myself. My Memaw cooked everything. She even cut up my Papaw’s meat for him at dinner. I wondered if Kelly would ever do such a thing. I doubted it. Why would you want a man like
that? I loved my Papaw, but when he watched as his food was divided into little pieces for him I always felt hot faced and uncomfortable, even when no one was over for dinner. He was still in good shape. Why couldn’t he do it?

I looked up and saw that Kelly had out one of those make-up mirrors at the table. She was applying some substance onto her face, not even eating anymore. She must have noticed me staring at her.

“What?” she asked.


“Are you sure?”

I should have just said yes. But it’d been two months now and I thought I should always be honest with her. So I said: “Do you have to do it here? Can’t you do it in the car?”

She paused for a second and I knew her voice would sound differently this time when she spoke. Col and I both knew this. “And risk getting in an accident?”

“You’re a good driver,” I said. Where was this coming from? I knew where. Lately, whenever I thought about Scoundrel’s I couldn’t help but grow restless, like I’d just been through the world’s longest doctor’s appointment. Some beast took over me. I didn’t want to call it jealousy, but I had to wonder why she had to choose that job. How long until she quit? I’d offered to help her pay for her community college classes but she’d refused, getting angry then.

Col saw this commotion as a distraction to go look in the cupboards.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Kelly said. “Sit back down and eat your food.”
Col protested and Kelly raised her voice and it made my heart race, disorienting me.

All of us were suddenly back at the table, silent again.

“Do you want me to be late, is that it?”

“No,” I said. I could never stay mad for very long, not like Kelly. In fact, I felt a little afraid. “I’m sorry. You know I just, I don’t know.”

Kelly looked at Col and I’m glad she was there. Without her things would have gotten worse. Despite only being five she was picking up on things all of the time. “We’re going to have fun, just us,” Col said, but it was phrased more like a question.

“Yeah we are,” I agreed. I’d rented The Princess Bride, a classic. Earlier I’d been looking forward to it, getting to know Col better, asking about her taste in movies, but now, I just wanted to get out. I didn’t want to wait in this cramped place for the moment when the two of us were sitting on the couch and I peered out from the blinds and saw Kelly backing out of the driveway, leaving for work. It made me feel sick every time it happened.

And then, like Col wasn’t even there, she said: “You think I enjoy it, don’t you? You think I’m glad I’m leaving?”

I chewed the chicken in my mouth. I shook my head no, that this wasn’t true, but then, I couldn’t help it. I said: “do you?”

I thought she was going to say “that doesn’t fucking matter,” or something like that but it was worse. She didn’t say anything.
I looked at her and then at Col and part of me wanted to grab my coat and go outside and give a good yell. I couldn’t stand the silence! I wished Kelly was the kind of girl who could just fight it out for an hour and then be done with it. But she wasn’t. Kelly brooded.

“It’s a job is what it is,” she said finally. “You’d do it too.”

I chuckled like she’d said there was life on the moon and then I felt strange about this. Strange and guilty. I’d heard of bars where men stripped for the women but I’d never seen one, ever. Who were people kidding? It only worked one way, and the truth of it made my eyes burn. Scoundrels. I despised every single hairy, sweaty, man in there. I imagined the grimy bar as a doll house, and me crushing it into plastic rubble with my hands.

I noticed Col’s eyes were glossy and crunched. She had no idea what was going on, and she was hungry.

“Can we just drop it?” I asked.

Kelly didn’t answer. After she finished eating she went to the bathroom and before I knew it she’d said goodbye. The moment occurred, the one I’d been dreading. But I sucked it up. I waited with Col, who was wasn’t herself the rest of the night, and watched the giant and the swordsman fight on the screen. Neither of us laughed.

Kelly had asked if I’d watch Col until work was over. From a babysitter’s perspective, it was an easy job. She’d drifted off halfway through the movie, drooling on the couch pillow. I’d been hoping she’d let her head rest on my shoulder, but she’d drooped the other way, breathing calmly. Was it intentional, or was that just the way
the sleep gods had willed it? Who the hell knows? But if Col’s little body had just swayed the other way, I’d have stayed glued to that couch, and the night would have turned out very differently.

When I got to Scoundrel’s Kelly was on stage with her top off. Men were shouting. Guns and Roses was playing in the background. I ordered a whiskey double and drank it, hating the taste.

I looked at my table in the back and I knew I couldn’t go and sit there. I slowly moseyed my way up toward the front. I stepped on some peanut shells and they croaked. I thanked the whiskey in me and eventually I was standing right there in the front.

“Move your head,” someone was shouting. I didn’t listen. Just stared up at her. Kelly still didn’t see me, I couldn’t believe it. Or was she ignoring me?

“Move your fucking head I can’t see!”

I turned around to see a group of young ones. They were half my size and they all wore flannels and Timberlands to make them look older and taller. “Go fuck yourselves,” I said, liking how it sounded coming out of my mouth.

But I’d spoken too loudly because a couple of men were walking up from the back, quickly. It was only a matter of seconds before they’d be on me.

One of the kids threw an empty bottle at me. Hit me in the shoulder. Didn’t hurt much. I could have crushed him, right there, and I almost did. The balls of my feet got ready to lunge at him, the kid even flinched, but then I stopped. Instead, I
turned around and gave one final look at Kelly, pleading for her to see me, to do something.

And she did. As I felt rough callused hands grab my arms she shouted to the bouncers to wait, but they didn’t listen. We were tussling. They were strong. I had flashbacks of ferociously going after a loose ball. I grabbed one of them by the shirt, pretending he was one of those Morehead Seniors, and I threw him but he didn’t go far. Luckily, there was a chair he tripped over and he fell to the floor, but he was up in an instant, back on me.

Me and the two giant bouncers were the ones putting on the show now. We were the entertainment. I could hear the little weasels laughing behind me.

Kelly entered the corner of my vision, coming closer. “He’s with me,” I heard her shout again. I felt my chest swell with pride, even more than on our first date. Their grips were loosening. I glanced at all the others staring at this scene and I smiled at them.

Kelly grabbed one of them by the arm, and that stopped the action. We were all just standing now, pulsing and breathing heavy.

“Put him in the back,” she said. “He won’t do nothing more.”

And without even answering her they dragged me back towards my table. It was empty and they sat me down without a word. I couldn’t believe it. I just looked down at the carvings on the wood of my table and smirked, content.
The feeling didn’t last. In the skirmish, Kelly had looked me, and I was thinking about it now. She’d looked at me seriously as if to say “you owe me one.” It didn’t look to be out of love, not at all.

And why should it have been? I’d left her daughter all alone and caused a ruckus while she was working. I’d cost her money. My shirt was wet with sweat. What the hell had I done?

And yet, why had she intervened at all? Why didn’t she just have me thrown out in the dark?

Kelly had resumed her dance, and I couldn’t watch, not here, not any longer. Fuck this place in the back. Or the front for that matter.

I slipped out of the bar and headed back to the trailer, hoping that Col had been asleep this whole time. My ears rung and my legs shook while I drove. I’m ashamed to say it but the only thing that calmed me down was thinking of Kelly dancing just for me again.

But in the fantasy, when she was done, then it’d be my turn. I’d get up in front of her and I’d start to dance. Sure I would. Big old me.
Shipyards
I.

Wool sweaters and deer jerky were the main items in her dad’s duffle bag. Wendy put a picture of the three of them—mother, daughter, and father—inside one of his books. She had helped him pack little by little in the weeks past, and in that time they had temporarily forgotten about their shyness towards each other. With their task now finished, they sat in silence. The bag lay before them like a sleeping dog.

Wendy’s mother wasn’t due home for an hour, maybe more because of the snow. She was taking classes towards her master’s in education up at Orono, an hour from where they lived in Belfast. In eastern Maine, 1980, your choices for higher education were slim and often a good drive from home.

Wendy grew restless on the couch next to her dad, who wore a tattered red and grey flannel. Often times she’d seen it on her mother, hanging off her like a cloak. She was tempted to grab hold of the sleeve and rub her cheek against it, but then looked up at the man with sharp stubble on his face and thought otherwise. Besides, her father was most likely thinking about his journey ahead at sea. Even at age ten, she knew he wanted this. Tucker Crowe was a man who reread *Treasure Island* on his side of the bed while Wendy and her mother played stuffed animals on the other. Yes, she was sad he would be leaving for a month. But she also felt a peculiar excitement in the pit of her stomach at the thought of just the two of them—mom and daughter—occupying their warm home, having sleepovers every night and watching movies on the old TV as snow fell outside.
She decided to go stand watch out the front window, clumsily hauling a kitchen stool over for a better vantage point. Except for the occasional splash of yellow lamplight from a house nearby, everything was a grayish, sleepy white. The falling snow hypnotized her. After a while she focused her gaze on the flakes that descended in the patches of light, the rest now too dark to see. Suddenly, the thought of her mom crept into her mind and broke her trance. She began to worry.

The sound of her dad rummaging through the kitchen drawers meant he was thinking about it too. Wendy left her post to see him. She didn’t help, just stared, as a young child would be expected to do. “I’m tryin to think who I could call…” he said.

“Her class got out at five.” He seemed to continue his search around the kitchen because he was on display, trying to appease the eyes of a young girl wondering where her mother was. The same phone book had been flipped through twice, papers above the fridge taken down and examined.

Wendy went back to the window, but the scene outside felt different. The falling snow didn’t matter to her now; what she wanted was the two headlight beams from their station wagon to pierce through the flakes and appease her the way sunbeams appease a sailor in a storm.

Wendy hadn’t heard him come into the living room, but now her father’s silhouette cast a strange gloom upon the wet glass. She wished he’d keep looking for numbers to call. There had to be other numbers. She said nothing. Together they waited and watched, listening to the heat quietly hiss through the vent.
Next, a dream. Of her father.

He’s freshly shaven, with dark hair that matches his clothes. He sits alone on a cold step, the only one outside, but others glance from the window, talking and eating.

“The girl’s gonna be spending a lot of time at daycare,” a cousin says.

“No grandparents to help out either.”

A large man with a beard just recently trimmed pushes open the double doors and sits down next to him. His name is Buford. “Jesus it’s cold.”

Tucker Crowe says nothing, so the large man goes on: “These pea coats just don’t cut it up here. We’re down-feather men, aren’t we?”

Cars drive by. The funeral parlor is on the busiest road in Belfast.

“I met her across the street,” Tucker says. “When I bus-boyed at Three Sides Pub. She was on a New England road trip.”

“I remember you first telling me about her,” Buford says.

Tucker’s mind is already elsewhere, not wanting to stay in one place for long. His eyes are dry, like the craters on Mars. “If I could go on this trip,” he says, “like I was supposed to. I know it would help. Catch swordfish the size of buck. Let the water wash it away for awhile.”

Buford’s thinking carefully of what to say. There’s a lot of empty space between their words.
Tucker’s staring longingly into the bushes, as if some magical solution is hiding there. It’s then his gaze hits Wendy hiding on the cold dirt, watching the two men.

You shouldn’t be listening to this, his look says. A wind blows. You shouldn’t be here.

III.

Wendy couldn’t remember if her dad had woken her. She sat up in bed, feeling out of place in her dark, slumbering room. Faint light seeped through the outline of the door, but she could hear no movement. Why’s that matter? She thought. Her dad was a quiet man—she never knew when he moved about the house. For the past few years it’d been just the two of them, filling corners of rooms with wooden ship models they’d built together.

Wendy put her head back on the warm pillow and curled up beneath her haven of blankets. She wished time didn’t move so fast while she slept—she preferred it to move slower than real life. The prospect of more rest was too blissful to be real. The image of her father minutes before now solidified in Wendy’s mind: a solemn but broad shadow in the doorway, staring in at her. He never entered, only said her name.

As fatigue disappeared like dew in sunlight, details began to congeal in her mind and they told her to get moving. It was Saturday morning. October 15th, Belfast, Maine. They were heading to the dock to watch a ship sail off into the Atlantic Ocean. Since her mother had died they tried to make it to the docks to see a boat off whenever they could.
She peeled the covers off herself and got dressed in the morning chill. Downstairs, she found her father making toast for the both of them.

An image of him in the kitchen years before. Both of her parents, actually. They are dancing to Nirvana on the stereo. Wendy watches secretly from the family room. First, her mom is playing the guitar with the broom, and her dad’s laughing at her.

“Your turn,” she says, and holds out the broom to him like it’s a sword.

Her dad just laughs and shakes his head.

Her mom walks closer and hugs him and forces it into his big hands. “You know you love this song,” she says. “Come on, let me see it Tuck!”

And as if she turned a switch on his back, her dad starts to jam away. First, his eyes are a little wet and his face is red. He’s embarrassed because he doesn’t do things like this. But as the screechy-voiced man sings, her dad starts to get into it, and all of a sudden he’s shred his self-consciousness, his motions nice and fluid. He sticks his tongue out and bends into a pose that looks kind of like a lawn gnome. He even imitates the growl coming from the stereo.

Her mom is laughing, a deep belly laugh, and she’s hunched over. Wendy, on the couch, can’t help herself. She’s laughing too because she’s never seen him act like that.
Now his hair was graying and messy from sleep, but his brown eyes looked aware, as if they’d been open for several hours already. He came over to Wendy and kissed her on the head, but it seemed staged, like someone had whispered the idea in his ear right before she’d come downstairs. She didn’t like it.

“How’d you sleep?” He asked.

“Good.” She didn’t add: If only for another month, even though she thought it. It was her first year at the junior-high in Belfast, which started at seven fifteen in the morning. To get up even earlier on a Saturday made Wendy’s heart drop a little further in her chest, and even though her eye lids always drooped on the car ride down to the shipyard and her body yearned in the cold months to be back beneath her quilts, she never complained. He needed someone to stand next to, like a first mate. Her father had a way of acting like a lone wolf but Wendy didn’t buy into it at all. Even yesterday he’d asked her three times if she was sure she didn’t want to come with him to Jack’s Grocery. He’d made it sound like he was offering a favor, and it had made her smirk, but not while he was looking. Finally she’d said alright, I’ll go.

Or maybe she didn’t want him to go to the docks alone because she was scared of something. But what?

*Him never coming back* was the answer, but she shook it out of her head.

Everything was mist that morning. The air felt heavy but clean, mostly rid of the dead fish smell which was sure to return. The great hull looked like an unnatural grey mass, as if a mountain had been lackadaisically placed on the water. Wendy and
her father found a spot on a pier not far from the dock and watched as the crew talked amongst themselves, untying the thick ropes that kept the boat near land.

“It’s almost ready,” her dad said, rubbing his hands together like it was Thanksgiving dinner. He boyishly smiled at Wendy and she smiled back.

“How long has it been, dad?” She asked him. For some weird reason it felt risky asking him this.

“What do you mean? Last time a boat left?”

“No…I mean, I don’t know, when’s the last time you went out on one?”

“Well,” he said, taking a breath. “Probably with you and your mom, when we went to Bar Harbor.”

Wendy barely remembered that trip. She wanted to ask him how long ago they’d gone, and how old he was now. 34 or 35? There were more splotches of grey in his hair and they hadn’t been there for very long.

A horn sounded and the boat’s engine began to churn. Anticipation awoke like the start of a race. The gush of water meant the beginning of a journey. Slowly the boat began to drift from the dock.

Here was the farthest they got. Wendy thought about her father poring over maps of coastal Maine and beyond. She could not help but glance at him now; his eyes so fixed upon the structure he’d help build for months as it shrank in the distance. Wendy’s face flushed with unwelcome heat. An image materialized on the screen inside her head: him reaching out his arm as if to grab hold of a cleat on the ship and shout: “wait for me!”
A deep, raspy voice came from behind them, which made Wendy sigh in relief. “Wouldn’t wanna be those poor souls,” it said. “Their balls so cold they probably shot right back inside em!” It was of course Buford, another shipbuilder who worked with Tucker and was her father’s closest friend in Belfast. He cackled, sounding like a car with no muffler. “The size of raisins, I bet!”

Wendy prepared herself for a smothering warm hug from the grizzly bear. His thick brown beard tickled her forehead, but she imagined it felt better than her father’s prickly stubble. When was the last time she’d been bear-hugged by her father? She wondered.

“You know,” Buford said to her, “Jimmy’s been talking about you. Says you didn’t wanna work with him in school.”

Wendy’s face became even more blushed. Jimmy was in her grade at Belfast Middle. She thought he had a crush on her. She also thought he looked too much like a younger version of his father. He was a strange but good friend, nothing else. “We couldn’t work together because we got assigned partners in class,” she said. “Otherwise I would’ve.” This was the truth. After the period was over, Jimmy had gone up to her and said that they were above the rules of the class and that their special bond meant they should both ditch their partners.

“I’m only ruffling your feathers. Besides, who’d want to work with my son? He’s lazy. Gets into trouble too much.”

“Hey, he’s a nice kid,” Tucker chimed in, arms folded. “I’d be his partner.”

“That’s because no one would be your partner! You’d take anybody!”
Wendy laughed at Buford’s remark, encouraging him.

“Your dad!” He pointed his thumb towards Tucker mockingly. “He’d probably go cry to the teacher: no one will work with me!”

Wendy loved when her father legitimatedly laughed because it was very contagious. She watched the two of them closely now, trying to pick up pointers from Buford on how to do it. Sure, he chuckled at her, but it was never like this. Buford went on for another minute before he ran out of steam.

As they walked back towards the parking lot, Tucker asked Buford what really brought him here on a Saturday.

“You guys aren’t the only ones who like to bid a ship farewell,” he said. “Just wish I could persuade Jimmy to get up with me, the lazy bum.” Buford clumsily retrieved a pack of Chesterfields from his coat pocket and removed one. Then he found a match pad from another pocket. “The boy’s got it too easy. No work ethic. And he eats too much.”

“Look who’s talking,” Tucker said.

“You remember me when you first started working at the docks?” Buford asked defiantly, his chest puffing out some. “I was built like a brick shit house! It’s Linda who’s been cooking too many unhealthy meals.”

They reached their cars. Wendy couldn’t wait to get the heat blasting, although the air had to warm first, which took awhile in her dad’s truck.

“Celtics game tonight,” Buford posed. “Am I coming over?”

“Seven thirty,” Tucker said.
In the car, conversation died down, and Wendy thought about what the rest of her day had in store. On Saturdays she would often go on hikes with her father, but today a nap and reading sounded better. Jimmy would probably come over with Buford later.

Wendy looked at her father, who drove with one hand gently guiding the bottom part of the steering wheel. She could tell his friend had calmed his nerves. Still, she knew he thought about the boat as he drove, delimited by the same pine trees he’d known for thirty years. Maine woods have a way of closing in on you, she had begun to realize. Her father’s eyes were on the road, but she could tell his mind was on the deck of the vessel, where there wasn’t a tree in sight.

III.

Jimmy was a portly seventh-grader, who like his father, claimed most of his girth was hard-earned muscle. “Next year, I’m gonna make the basketball team,” he said. “I’ve got the bulk. Now I’m just waitin’ for my growth-spurt.”

They were playing rummy in her room. Wendy picked up an ace and sorted it into her hand. “You ever think about going out for a different sport?” One that requires less jumping ability, she thought. And stamina, while we’re at it.

Jimmy looked up from his hand and gave her a subtle shake of his head. “No way, Jose. Born to play ball, this guy was.”

“I’ll come to a game of yours,” she said. “If you make the team next year.”
Her remark clearly made Jimmy’s heart pick up its pace—Wendy could even see the pulse in his neck—but he attempted to keep things cool. He rearranged his cards, cleared his throat. “Yeah, sure. That’d be fine.”

After Wendy won the hand, she went to the kitchen to get glasses of milk for the both of them. Buford and her father were watching the Celtics, who were losing badly. She knew this not because she had glanced at the screen but because they were talking about other things.

Buford’s unmistakable gravel-like tone drifted into the kitchen: “I wonder if there’s anyone who’d take her for a couple months. I mean we would. I’m sure Jimmy and Linda’d be thrilled.”

There was a pause. Then her father’s voice: “No, no, forget it.”

“Alright. Be no trouble…”

Once they fell silent Wendy didn’t know what to do. Part of her wanted to let the milk carton drop onto the floor and spill everywhere. Another part of her wanted to go stomping into the room with the two of them watching their game and turn it off and stare at the both of them and yell. She didn’t know what she would yell but she’d yell alright.

The wind was pestering the window, making it wine and groan. The sound had scared her before but now it sounded like a calling.

She waited in silence, trying to control her brooding until The Celtics went on a lucky run. As Tucker and Buford focused again on the game, she slipped past them.

“Where’s the milk?” Jimmy asked.
Wendy didn’t respond. What had her dad said to prompt such a response from Buford? It didn’t matter—he’d spoken, given it voice. She had always known that if her father’s desire to go to sea went beyond his looks of longing at boats, she’d disappear. And that’s what she planned to do.

She searched her closets for warm, non-cotton clothing that would keep her dry. She was confident that she could build fires, but food was an issue. She couldn’t hunt, and there weren’t any berries to be picked, not this time of year.

*Doesn’t matter,* she thought, enjoying the steady, strong punches in her chest and the electric current that pulsed through her arm hairs. She was ready to be out of his way. Nothing would stop her.

“Wendy,” Jimmy pleaded. “What the heck is going on?”

It might be smart to have someone with her out in the woods at night, she decided. Even if it was Jimmy. “Wanna camp out for a few days?” She asked him.

“Sure,” he said. “When?”

“Tonight. Before the game’s over.”

Jimmy’s eyes widened as if he’d seen an apple pie being tossed in the trash.

“Tonight?”

“Yeah, spur of the moment.”

“But…it’s cold. Weather man says snow might come!”

“I know a great place not far from here. A small cave right by the water. We could build a fire.”
He looked at the cards on the floor and seemed to anxiously savor the warm air around him, as if thinking this was the last time he’d have such luxuries.

“Just us,” Wendy said.

IV.

The night was cold and blank, no moon and few stars. She could see her boots bullying little water droplets in the grass as she walked. The backyard quickly gave way to brush and swaying trees that looked like dancing giants in the white rays of their flashlights.

Behind her, Jimmy was attacked by a pricker bush. “Son of a…mother of frickin…God blessed…” he never completed the curse, and it made Wendy chuckle, slowing her mind down so she could attempt to get a bearing on which way they needed to walk. She knew there was a path around here, one her father had made years back that eventually reached the ocean but finding it at night was proving to be impossible. Owls began to hoot from different directions, and it disoriented her. Wind picked up and slowed down sporadically. There was an ethereal buzz in the woods and it made her feel like an intruder.

She trudged on and Jimmy followed. “If we get to the top of this hill we should be good,” she told him at one point.

“That’s a big ‘if.’ I thought you knew these woods, Wendy!”

“It’s different at night when—”
Wendy’s foot caught a root beneath the leaves, and she suddenly felt the top of her body surge like a loose hand of a clock. Her ankle twisted awkwardly and she felt some strand inside it tear.

Jimmy was there in an instant, crouched like a catcher beside her. “Are you ok?”

“Fine,” she said. Her ankle throbbed and the skin on her palms burned from bracing herself in the dirt.

“Let’s go back” Jimmy said.

“No.”

“We can’t see anything in here, Wendy!”

“Well you can go back then,” she said, and saw him instinctually consider the idea. It frightened her because she needed him. There was no way she could take on the woods at night all by herself, at least not yet, and so she added, “If you wanna leave me, go ahead.”

Jimmy took a breath and looked at her, thinking. “No way, Jose,” he said, his favorite phrase, and helped her up. Pain slinked up Wendy’s leg but she didn’t say anything. Instead she turned from him and trekked on, hoping the throb would dull as she kept moving.

It didn’t. Her ankle was either broken or badly sprained.

“You’re, uh…kinda limping a lot,” Jimmy said after what seemed like twenty minutes.
She hadn’t wanted him to voice it. Up to then she’d been tricking herself to keep going, concentrating on spreading the distance between her and her father but now the secret had been let out about her ankle. She let herself fall down on some pine needles. How long had they been out here? An hour? *Probably less,* she thought. Time always moved slower in the woods. But she knew they were close to the top of the hill, and after that it was just downward until rocks and water.

Once she stopped moving she realized how cold it was. Jimmy looked at her cautiously from a few feet away. She could see his heavy breaths in the air.

“That means it’s freezing, right?” He asked, waving his hands through the vapor before it vanished in the dark.

“That think so,” Wendy said.

They sat in silence for awhile. Wendy’s flashlight started to flicker so she turned it off to save whatever energy it had left. She could barely see anything. Eventually Jimmy snuck his arm around her, telling her it was so they would keep warm. Wendy thought about unrolling the sleeping bags or building a fire. She doubted Jimmy could start one. She tried to remember her dad’s method of gathering little sticks into a teepee and building on from there. She could start one on her own, she was sure.

*On her own.* The words echoed in her head. Jimmy would not follow her forever, and once he left that’s how it would be. I’ve got to go south, to Portland, she thought. In a city, she could do anything, get a job maybe. She’d have to lie about her age for a few years.
The realization was starting to creep in. A few years of existing as a kid without a home was like voyaging the Atlantic on an inner-tube. What was she doing here?

It was as if Jimmy was reading her thoughts because now he was asking here the same question. “What are we gonna do, Wendy?” There was a little more desperation in his voice. The cold forest had sedated them for a bit and now they had awoken, but it almost seemed too late. Goosebumps crept onto Wendy’s skin and it was then that she noticed her feet were becoming numb. Some of her pain had subsided but that didn’t reassure her at all. Plus Jimmy’s heart was beating fast and she didn’t think it was because his arm was wrapped around her anymore.

“Don’t panic,” she told him, but she regretted saying it because Jimmy began breathing even faster through his nostrils and his eyes looked watery.

“We aren’t even on the path,” he said. “And it’s getting so cold.”

It had rained earlier, Wendy remembered. All the wood would be wet and difficult to burn.

“We’ve got to go back,” he said.

He helped her up but when she tried to walk her foot screamed in protest. It felt both broken and frozen.

“Get on my back,” Jimmy said, and clapped his hands together a few times, psyching himself up like a linebacker going in for the sack. He even gave out a little roar.
She knew he’d kill them both if he tried to carry her. “Jimmy,” she said. “Our
dads probably went out looking for us after the game. I think you should head back
the way we came.”

“What?” His eyebrows raised a good couple inches, up near his hairline.

“Just walk forward, in as straight a line as you can.”

“What about you?”

Wendy felt a shiver ripple through her. The forest had always been her friend.
Just because it was dark in here now didn’t change anything, she thought, and tried to
believe it. Besides, somewhere inside of her, she felt a tiny yearning to be a true lone
wolf.

If they didn’t do something they’d freeze to death, she said. Jimmy clenched
his fist determinedly and said “I’ll return for you.” Wendy watched his flashlight beam
slowly bob its way down the hill until it vanished behind all of the pines.

It was only once she was by herself that she realized how intimidating the
woods were at night. She felt swallowed, like she was inside a giant whale. Noises
she couldn’t really place swirled all around her. Courage was leaking out of her and
she thought rapidly of ways to clog it up.

The flashlight didn’t help. The flickery splotch of light only kick-started her
imagination. Every branch looked like a mangled hand trying to grab her.

Something was moving in the blackness not far away, stepping on dead leaves.
Wendy thumbed her flashlight off, not wanting to see it. She bunched herself up like
she was about to cannonball into water. She felt her spine sink deeper into the cold
muddy ground. “It’s probably a squirrel,” she said to the dark. Another crunch. And another. She didn’t know why, but the noise made her think of bones snapping.

“Jimmy?” She said.

*Wendy, it’s me.* The voice came from her head. But could she hear it with her ears too? She wasn’t sure.

It was a woman’s voice. Wendy hadn’t *really* listened to another woman’s voice in years. It felt so strange to listen to it now because she’d been thinking so hard about her father that she’d completely forgotten about her mother. And it sounded like her, didn’t it? That same honey, singsong way she had of talking.

If she turned on the flashlight and shined it in the direction of the voice, Wendy imagined she’d see her mom floating there, staring. But she didn’t look. Too much time had passed, and none of this concerned her mother. A ghost was a ghost, no matter who it might try to resemble.

*Why’d you run away, Wendy?* It asked generically. This was not her mother. Wendy was already hunching up onto her legs, ready to keep moving. She thought about answering the voice, tempted to talk with it for just a few minutes so she could make sure.

Wendy stood up straight, clenched her jaw, and ignored the pain. She navigated through more brush, picking up speed as she distanced herself from that voice until she was dashing through leathery wet leaves and pointy branches. The more she moved the more her ankle loosened up. The ghost didn’t call after her and Wendy was grateful for that.
The water was getting closer—she could tell by the saltiness of the air now. The ground had leveled out and now it was quickly sloping downwards. She was gaining momentum, too much of it. Her shin caught some extra-tight vine, one that would not give way against her stride and then she was tumbling downwards, getting scratched, knocking into wood and tiny rocks, but still glad to be moving. She wished she’d keep on rolling until she passed into nothingness.

V.

Wendy woke up shivering. The wetness of the ground had seeped through her pant legs. This must be how waking up blind feels, she thought. She also couldn’t remember when she’d fallen asleep.

She took attendance of her body. There were new, pulsing bruises and scrapes and her head throbbed dully, but her ankle seemed to be alright. Not far off, she could hear the rhythmic wash of water hitting rock. She lifted her head and shined her flashlight from where she’d come. There was no sign of anything but the black trees that ascended the hill.

Wendy took a deep breath. If she’d tumbled down a forest hill at night, escaping whatever it was she’d encountered back there, she could make it on her own. Her ankle probably wasn’t broken, either, because how could she have run on it like that? And why wasn’t it killing her now? She pressed both palms onto the dirt and propped herself up.

To her surprise, there was no protest from her ankle. She flicked on the flashlight and took a step. Still the pain slept. Perhaps it had been popped into place
at some point during her tumble? She refused to think about it more, just pressed on, and quickly the trees panned out until she no longer needed the flashlight.

The terrain changed from twigs and leaves and mud to smooth grey stone. Wendy looked up. She was standing on a great flat rock, one of the thousands that stretched down the coast each way she looked, jutting out of the foamy water. The waves sparkled with moonlight, and they shushed the sounds of the forest back from where she’d come.

And who was that standing on the edge? The figure had broad shoulders, and it was tying some rope in its hands.

Instead of running, Wendy clenched her fist and stepped further out onto the stone. Tiny specks of water landed on her face.

“Who are you?” She shouted. Her eyes were getting used to the light.

It didn’t answer, just drew closer to her. Wendy stood her ground.

The image of her father materialized out of the shadows, wearing his reading glasses. He only wore them around her. A moon beam reflected off one of his lenses, making him look ghostly. *But you’re no ghost*, she thought. This parent was very real, the only one she had.

“This isn’t a rescue mission,” she said. “I’m going away.”

Her father was silent, thinking. Finally, he said: “I’d like to come along.” His voice meshed well with the sound of the waves. He turned around and looked down below the rock. Wendy peered that way too, curious.
Floating on the water was a white canvas sailboat. It bobbed, waiting for them, roped to the last tiny tree nearly waded in the water.

Wendy was having a hard time mustering the resilience she’d felt toward him back in the woods. Everything in her felt dulled. She looked out at the little star of the lighthouse further down the coast. Beyond that was the shipyard, she knew. He must have sailed over from there, Wendy thought.

She followed him down the side of the rock, using the smaller boulders as steps, and hopped into the boat. She felt surprisingly balanced and confident standing on deck. The wind blew. It sounded like a triumphant horn. Her father untied his knot and they began to drift away from shore. The branches of the trees were waving their goodbyes.

“I’m glad I’m with you,” he said. To Wendy, it seemed he’d said it of his own accord—not because he was on display or because he was supposed to, and at least in the moment she believed him.
Broken Glass
I.

“You know how,” Kaleena says in Joe’s ear. She smiles, revealing white, miraculous teeth. Her movements are rubbery from the alcohol.

Somehow Joe has a hand on her skirt, the smoothness of it. He’s very close to her now, close enough to see tiny bumps on her forehead, the glossiness of her eyes. How much has she had to drink? He thinks. How much have I had? His other hand dangles awkwardly for a second before Kaleena joins it with hers. They are in between a slow-dance and a hug. Down here there are people and flashing lights everywhere, though the ground is covered in dirt and dust.

“How would that be?” He asks, keeping the game going. He feels like he’s floating. His hand strengthens its hold on her butt.

“You know,” Kaleena says again in that same you’re not stupid voice. Suddenly she’s kissing him. Joe’s skin tingles, and for an unrestrained moment he indulges. Her lips are soft and thick. She tastes like a strange, expensive fruit.

Joe’s mouth detaches from Kaleena’s. Suddenly, his clothes are suffocating him. It’s so uncomfortably warm. There’s an eel squirming around inside his stomach. Kaleena must notice because she’s starting to back away just slightly, panning the room for her friends. Xanax, where’s my Xanax? Joe thinks, but of course it’s at home. He didn’t bring it out with him.

Joe is tall and has thick blond hair. He’s got just the right amount of five o’clock shadow going because girls like stubble. Why did he plan his facial hair when he knew he wouldn’t even see Leah tonight? The question didn’t seem to have an
answer, even once he got to the party. When they arrived, he and his two friends
found the keg and talked to each other loudly, waiting there awhile, filling up a few
times. They saw other people they knew, took a shot for their friend’s birthday. And
another. The clock on the stove read 11:45. Joe imagined Leah packing up her books
at the library and heading home to microwave a dinner. Her CPA exam was this
Monday.

Joe and his friends went down to the basement. Rave music, laughter and
shouts all intertwined. In the swim of drunkenness Joe lost them within minutes. He
thanked the beer and the shots. Without them, he’d surely give in to the
claustrophobia, the bumping, the not knowing anyone. Truth was he hated these
parties, the “ragers” that his college held in such high esteem. But he went and drank
and made himself have fun, even though he’d wanted to stay in and read.

Joe thought about finding his way upstairs and escaping into the night air.
Taking some advice his counselor had given him, he softly said: “It’s not me. It’s my
anxiety.” Little mantras were apparently good. No one heard his mutterings in all the
noise.

He wandered the giant basement and before he knew it Kaleena was in front of
him. She’d been in a poetry class of his freshman year. Her poems were much better
than his. Her rhythm and enjambments made them sound like songs, and whenever
she read one out-loud he couldn’t help but stare at her until he almost reached his
hands out and meshed them into her hair, even after he’d begun things with Leah.
And here she was again, in front of him at this party, and they’d said hello, and he wasn’t nervous because of the alcohol, and they talked. He told her he really did love her poems.

“I’m sorry,” she said empathetically. “I really can’t remember yours.”

They both laughed about this. Joe joked that he was hurt. It was so much easier to play this game drunk. He also thought: *what am I doing here? Should I be doing this?*

“It’s ok,” Joe said. “I don’t consider myself a poet.”

“What do you consider yourself?”

“I’m not sure.” It was a simple question, but he was answerless in the craze of this party. “I’m an outdoor recreation major. I love that kinda stuff.”

“I always want to go hiking!” She said. “But none of my friends will go.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“Ok,” she said, and smiled at him.

They were very close, touching at random places. People brushed past, bumping them, spilling drops of beer, but neither of them cared. They fell silent for a moment.

“Hey,” Kaleena said.

“What?”

“How come you never talked to me in class? Or those times we passed each other?”
Joe could have asked her the same question, or said he hadn’t seen her. He could have told her the truth and said that after passing Kaleena on the street it took him awhile to calm down. Eventually his heart would slow down again and go back to Leah—only her, who he saw movies with, studied with, slept with most nights.

Instead, he just said: “I’m not sure,” and looked down. “Just choked I guess.”

“Everybody chokes.” With each word they seemed to gravitate just a little bit closer to each other. Joe felt that lost shot now. He really wasn’t with it, he told himself from somewhere behind one of those safety nets they use at batting cages and zoos.

“Well, how could I make up for it?” He asked. A tiny warning light came from somewhere. A little caution faerie fluttering around the room.

“You know,” she said.

Now he studies the room and it’s like a chess game where somehow his pieces are in all the wrong spots. His pragmatic side takes control for a minute. No one’s paying attention to anything in this mayhem. It’s a moment that will be lost, even to him if he lets it.

And yet still Joe has the remnants right here in front of him: Kaleena, standing a little awkwardly but somehow complacent too, probably from the alcohol. Her consciousness seems to recognize something’s off but it hasn’t told her body yet. And he hasn’t quite let go of the craving for more. Kissing Kaleena feels so alien, as he suspects it would be with anyone who isn’t Leah.
A new, disorientating wave of anxiety comes. He can’t get out of the moment and yet everything else goes on around him as if on a film screen. In the corner, a pair of eyes studies him. His name is Ian, a high school friend of Leah’s, who she buys weed from now. He’s thin and pale with long dirty hair. Their gazes meet, but there’s no wave, no head nod, no sign that either will come over and chat. Instead, Ian’s heading for the stairs, seeming to be making his way out in a hurry.

II.

*It’s a town of broken glass,* Joe thought two weeks ago. *Only fools or hobbits walk bare-foot around here.*

It was a hot Tuesday afternoon. He was walking downstairs and he saw, out the window, the sunny gleam of broken glass shards on his porch. He couldn’t help but think of thick, mangle-haired hobbit feet. *Wouldn’t those be nice to have?* He thought. *So I can trudge through even the thickest piles of sharp glass.*

Leah was on the porch, probably drinking a Yuengling with two hands so she could feel the coolness on both of her palms. Joe could see her thick messy hair but that was all.

Upstairs he’d lasted awhile because he was thinking about other things. There had been enough on his mind to keep his sex drive at bay while not banishing it. There were times when he became too overcome with worry and was unable. On these occasions Leah would blame herself, too much stomach flab or her unsymmetrical nose, like she could pinpoint some key to unattractiveness. This only made it worse for Joe; guilt always made it worse.
But today had been good.

He was humming to himself as he reached his front door and was about to turn the knob when he sensed another presence outside. Yes, it was Ian, the weed dealer. Leah wore the face of “what a pleasant surprise” for her high school friend but Joe saw that beneath it she was disappointed. She wanted to think and be alone.

Or maybe not. *Maybe I’ve gotten it wrong*, Joe thought, because now she was talking to him and she seemed to be interested in what he had to say.

Ian was nervously slipping his hand in and out of his jean pocket. He was the kind of guy who wore dark jeans even on a hot day like this. Joe had always thought there was something wrong with him. Leah identified with such idiosyncratic people, people who never played an organized sport in their life, who were still obsessed with Nirvana. On Leah’s left wrist, there’s a couple of old scars, tiny slash marks.

“I only have twenty bucks on me, can I owe you?”


She asked if he was sure and Ian said of course he’s sure, that he feels bad he has to charge her anything but he has books to buy and rent is due soon. Joe went unnoticed behind the door, his hand still on the knob. *Open it*, he thought. *Go outside and make him leave*. He pictured Ian shielding his eyes and backing away at the sight of him.

Joe turned the knob loudly so they both looked at the door, but as he stepped out onto the sunny porch he thought about how he hadn’t gone to the gym in weeks.
He thought of his hairy, twiggy legs. What he needed was for Leah to come grab his hand but she didn’t do it. She stayed seated on the swing, far from him. Ian was closer to her than he was. Why was he so close? He didn’t have to be so close if he was just talking to her.

Joe pretended like he was checking his mailbox next to the door. He looked at a catalog for Dunham’s sports and rummaged through his head for something to say.

“Let me pay,” was what came out.

Ian and Leah both looked at each other, bemused, until they realized he was talking about the weed.

“I can pay the rest,” Joe repeated.

“Ebenezer Scrooge will pay the rest?” Leah asked.

“Sure I will.”

Leah shook her head like she was watching a terrible soap opera.

“Sure, that’d be good,” Ian said, running his hand through his thick, oily hair.

Joe took out his wallet, but then he remembered the climbing rope he’d bought yesterday. Blood rushed to his face. It was empty.

Ian saw that he didn’t have any money. “No worries,” he said, but looked away and scrunched his lips like he’d just put on chapstick. And now he was shaking his head the tiniest bit. Both of them were, across from him, united in their head shaking.
Joe had come out on the porch and interrupted them and offered to pay like a big shot and now he stood there like an idiot. But it’s my fucking house, Joe thought. And then: if we fought I’d kick your ass.

There was a deal on basketball shoes in the Dunham’s catalog. Joe read about it and stared at the pictures of the shoes until he made it obvious he was not going back inside.

“I’m drivin home in a few weeks,” Ian told Leah. “I don’t know if you were itching to go back for a weekend, but I can take you.”

“I might definitely hit you up on that,” she said, gently passing the bag of weed back and forth in her hands.

“Cool, just let me know.” Ian slipped his hands into his pockets and started to make his way toward the porch steps. He gave Joe a head nod and said “see you man.”

“Alrighty,” Joe said.

And then it was just the two of them, like he’d wanted, but it was too late. Joe went and sat next to Leah but everything felt wrong.

The swing creaked back and forth. It needed a cushion, Joe thought. It hurt his back to sit on for more than a minute.

Leah looked down the street. Ian was slowly fading away in the distance. The heat floating up from the black asphalt made him look like a mirage.

“He overcharges you,” Joe said.

Leah laughed again and shook her head. “I made out like a bandit,” she said.

“Have you ever even bought weed before?”
“It’s not even good stuff.”

This really made her laugh. “Who have you smoked with other than me?” She asked.

He couldn’t think of anything to say.

Leah gave him a little hug and rubbed his hair like he was a dog. She liked to mess with him. Joe couldn’t help but laugh a little. He was starting to feel relieved.

“You’re jealous is what you are,” she said, still smirking.

III.

“Is something wrong?” Kaleena asks above the bass and the shouts of the party.

Joe feels entirely wrong—that’s how he described it to his therapist. He used to feel that way when he’d go to the orthodontist and he hadn’t been wearing his retainer, so wrong that he started hyperventilating in those sweaty leather chairs. He had had to get out of there because that was the only way to escape the heaviness, the threatening wrongness that followed him like a shadow. It didn’t make it right. It only locked up the wrong like a flimsy chair under a knob.

“I’ll be right back,” Joe says, and leaves her, knowing he won’t return. In another dimension he’d have asked her to come back with him to his apartment. In yet another he would have never gotten into this situation, knowing all along what he was doing. Here, in this one, he exists in the embarrassing no-man’s-land between asshole and good guy, just a puppet of worry.
Where’s Ian? He thinks. His hands pulse as he dodges through the crowd. Walking upstairs is good for him, like a splash of cold water in the face. Upstairs, there’s one objective: getting to Ian.

He’s gone outside—Joe knows this somehow. Perhaps because of the look on Ian’s face as he left. It wasn’t a look of indifference, of “I’ll see what’s going on upstairs.” It was a look of necessity to get out. It reminded Joe of himself.

He passes a beer pong table on the porch and walks out into a misty rain. Scattered kids talk on the lawn. It must be ten degrees colder than when they arrived.

Where’s my liquor blanket? He thinks, starting to worry that he’s not as drunk as he thought. He holds onto the hope that he won’t remember any of this in the morning.

Joe desperately checks the side of the house.

And there he is. Ian is smoking a cigarette under the small overhang of the roof.

Got him. Joe lets a deep breath escape him. Though there’s still work to be done.

Ian blows a jet of smoke out of his nostrils but says nothing. He’s gotten a gauge in his ear, a big round gap outlined in black. Joe wonders where the rest of Ian’s earlobe is now. In a garbage dump somewhere next to a candy wrapper? Or do they give the skin back to you? His stomach squirms again.

Their eyes meet, sort of. Ian seems to be staring at something on Joe’s face. It makes him want to look in a mirror.

“I asked her out,” Ian says.

“We really only live a few streets away from each other, back up in Cleveland."

Joe went home for a weekend once with Leah. He’d met her younger brothers, took a walk to her elementary school. He thinks of Ian hiding in the bushes, watching as they swung on the swings and talked about old teachers and pranks they’d pulled. There’s a part of Joe that wants to grab him by his grimy sweatshirt and throw him into the wet gravel.

“But she said no,” Ian went on. “It was in high school and she said she liked me as a friend but nothing more.”

Joe wonders if he’s saying all of this because he saw what happened in the basement or if Leah is the only thing the two of them have in common to talk about. The uncertainty makes his skin feel warm and sweaty. He starts to massage one of the big veins in the back of his neck. “I’m sorry she felt that way,” Joe mutters.

Ian smiles. No you’re not, the smile says.

He wants to talk in riddles, Joe thinks. With a Xanax and maybe another beer he’d oblige Ian. They’d play this game out here in the dark between the houses until the party was over.

Joe checks his pockets one more time for a spare pill, but besides his phone, wallet and keys there are only crumbs. His hand fists into a rock and it strikes his own thigh. The pain steadies him a little.
Joe realizes both of Ian’s hands are shaking. Ash floats off his cigarette like little snow flurries. And what’s with his eyes? It’s like Ian is watching a split screen. *And look how big his pupils are,* Joe thinks.

What a sight they must be, Joe thinks, the two of them, quivering together out here, fighting their own battles. Joe imagines Kaleena walking out of the party and seeing him now, and suddenly it’s official. He hates tonight, everything about it. The stupid planning of his facial hair. The beauty of Kaleena. And of course, Ian, who’s talking now but his words aren’t sinking in.

“Well, can you repeat that?” Joe says.

Ian pauses and throws his cigarette butt into a puddle. He restarts, and his voice is raised a little. “It’s none of my business,” he says. He’s fighting with himself, Joe notices, debating whether to continue. “I’m not gonna tell her, so don’t you worry about that. I’m not even really jealous, anymore. But I just hope you think about it, man. Really give the whole damn thing some thought if you’re—”

Ian doesn’t finish because Joe is on him. He’s grabbed him by the sweatshirt, just like he wanted to, feeling like an eighth-grade bully. Ian doesn’t resist but he doesn’t look scared either.

“Fuck you,” Joe says. The words come out of his mouth desperately, ineffectively. He feels tears flooding on so he breaks away. Past the yard, onto the sidewalk, into the night.
V.

Leah is grumpy from being woken up but she’s also glad to see Joe. He called her three times outside of her apartment before she finally answered. She yawns. Joe has heard that yawns are contagious but that doesn’t seem to be the case here because he feels so far away from sleep he can’t even remember what it’s like. On Leah’s desk, beneath the poster of Aubrey Hepburn, is the plastic bowl her microwavable dinner came in, with some grains of rice left scattered on her notebook.

“Are you all right?” She asks him.

“Me? Yeah.” His heart reminds him of the bass at the party still. Luckily, his eyes are dry.

“You’re feeling anxious aren’t you?”

“Maybe a little,” he says. He wishes his hands would stop shaking like they are. “It’s fine though. Not too bad.”

“You sure?”

“Really, I’m ok.”

Leah is too tired to pry. They get in bed, flip off the light. Joe grips her tightly.

“Didn’t think you were gonna sleep over tonight,” she murmurs.


He hears air come out of her nostrils, a mix between a chuckle and a sigh. “Of course, Joe, it’s fine…sometimes I don’t sleep as well but it’s not a big deal.”

“When we’re in bed together?” he asks.

“I mean, it’s a small bed.”
This is news to him. He’s always slept fine with her there, better maybe. Does it make him feel worse? He doesn’t know. Who the hell knows? Joe wonders why he didn’t go home and grab a Xanax first. Maybe he will.

“I can go. I don’t want to disturb you.”

“Joe, cut the crap,” she says, sounding half awake.

After awhile Joe thinks Leah’s fallen asleep but then she says “love you,” and it startles him.

There’s more silence. The hush of the heater comes on. A tiny strand of a headlight from outside makes its way through the blinds and then it’s gone.

It’s now or never, Joe thinks. “Leah,” he whispers. God his heart feels like a firework. “There was a girl at the party… And I don’t know what happened.”

He waits. She’s silent. She starts breathing slowly and heavily, like a mini Darth Vader.

Joe stays up for hours, looking around in the dark, holding onto Leah. She’s sleeping so heavily she barely seems alive.

At some point the front door of the apartment creaks open.

Ian. His body turns to cement.

There’s a woman’s voice, two of them actually. They’re giggling, and it’s then that Joe realizes it’s just Leah’s roommates coming home from the bars.

Goddamnit, Joe thinks, and breathes. He puts both palms over his eyes.
Each time his heart revs up like that he pictures the years of his life as little tally marks on a chalkboard. One attack equals one swipe of a hand across the board, white dust in the air, a mark erased.
A Way In

Chapters I-VI
Chapter I

To me, Jimmy, school busses looked like vague spaceships in the morning gloom. The bulky mass was always shrouded by misty headlights, so really, standing at my stop, I could’ve been awaiting some alien abduction. And you know what I’d tell them, the aliens? I’d say take me in. Go ahead and do it.

I breathed into my hands while the bright beams passed my vision. By the time I could see again, the bus had already gobbled me up. One of these days I’d resist. I’d kick that door that looked more like a drive-thru window and I’d take off into the woods, escaping the monster that blew smoke into the air.

Logan, Ohio was full of woods. You could get lost in them for days. I’d done it. The town also had a small square, a bunch of sprawling country roads, and a couple of newer developments out a little ways from where I lived. I hated these new batches of houses. They’d cut down a thousand trees to make way for all the kids clad in Hollister, coming from Columbus, Cleveland, and Cincinnati.

Around town busses groaned and clashed with the morning peace, picking us up and migrating towards the mother-ship, Alexander High.

I sat towards the back, head pressed against the foggy window, listening to the hush of the heater. I kept my book-bag next to me in order to save the spot for Dave Namara. I spent the time in a haze until he arrived, watching the images of last night play out in my mind: Rione Smithlock and his dragon learning spells in the ancient mountainous city of Highcastle, awaiting inevitable battle. Things were hectic in that world at the moment. There were more fragmentary pictures, but these I barely
remembered, as I’d been fading into sleep. In the morning I’d woken with the book open on my chest and my light still on. There’s nothing more depressing that. You’re room still reminds you of the night before, the best time of any day, and yet you’re alarm clock is a blaring reminder of the world outside that you have to reenter.

I didn’t have to look up to know we’d reached Dave’s stop. This time of year, he carried two heavy bags—one for all his books, the other for his cross-country supplies, which included running shoes, change of clothes, athletic tape, protein bar, you name it. Dave would almost always bump into somebody on his mosey down the cramped aisle, waking them up with an accidental blow to the head with one of his bags. “Oh, scuse me,” he’d say. Rarely did anybody mind. He was well liked, tall, had a good complexion, which I was jealous of. I often noticed several girls on the bus hoping for the Namara Bag Nudge.

“You know,” Dave said, finally getting settled next to me, “we could sit closer to the front.”

“And miss all that?” I said.

Last year, as freshman, we sat further up, somewhat intimidated by the older students shouting threatening obscenities and throwing crumped-up paper balls. Most juniors and seniors drove to school, so now, as sophomores, we had little to fear.

I went back to staring out the window. My eyelids felt like thick wool blankets.

Fantasy novels are the shiftiest things. They lend you energy late at night and then snatch away any left in the morning. I didn’t regret it though, reading so late, not even when I woke in the sludge of morning. I just wanted to return to the book as if it
was a beautiful girl who’d broken your heart many times before but swore this time was different.

Of course, I knew little of those kinds of things. I thought of Alexa Grinell, an elfish (Lothlorien kind) looking girl in my English class while I gazed out the foggy glass and watched a farmer ride his tractor through a field of what looked like cabbage. Behind him, the sun was peeking out from behind a woody hill. I thought of Alexa and me riding a horse through the wet field, escaping a band of ring wraiths.

“No basketball gear,” Dave observed, “you aim to go through with it then?”

I felt a tinge of nervousness awaking in my legs. “Already have, basically,” I said. “I’m hoping the coaches just don’t say anything.” Last year, I’d started for Alexander at small forward on the freshman team. Not to brag, but I was the second leading-scorer for the season. The coaches expected me at try-outs again this year for junior varsity, which I’d attended for the first day, Monday. It was now Thursday, October 17th, 2003. Final day of try-outs, and I’d skipped the last two. I was going to quit, and even the frantic attitude of my dad, pacing around the living room like it was a surgery waiting area, asking me constantly “are you sure about this?” wouldn’t stop me.

“Bold,” Dave said. “But I respect it. You are good though. Seems like a waste of talent.”

Don’t get me wrong. I liked to play. Some were intimidated by my dark skin tone, inherited from my mom, who has a lot of Mattaponi tribe in her bloodline. Apparently, our heritage dates back to Chief Logan, who the town was named after,
though I’m not sure if there’s any truth to it. Either way, I stuck out on the basketball court in southern Ohio. Most players on opposing teams argued over who had to guard me at first, probably imagining getting dunked on or crossed over out of their shoes. This was ridiculous because I was a shooter. Had the ups of a statue, despite my dad’s best efforts to increase my vertical leap with numerous jump roping drills. My twin sister, Joanie, was a different story. She’d have been on the bus with me if not for early morning volleyball conditioning.

“Another spot on the team’s up for grabs huh?” Dave thought out loud.

“Makes me wanna try out.”

“Your running coach isn’t gonna let you, is she?”

“Nah, she won’t. And I’d get laughed at.”

“You wouldn’t get laughed at,” I said. We’d played together in middle school. He wasn’t bad. I told him this.

Dave smiled and looked off into nowhere, a flattered twinkle in his eye. “You think so?” He put himself down only so I could reassure his skills. “You know, I wasn’t a bad point guard. Got you the ball a lot.”

We talked more about sports, like Dave’s chance of going to states in the 5k (slim) and whether I’d play rec ball until we arrived and filed out into a morass of students. Living in Logan meant you were used to open farmlands and woods, not crowds, but Alexander High was an exception, with a student population of over a thousand students from surrounding areas. I hated it, especially once I had to enter the place. The halls were as crammed as the arteries of a seven hundred pound man.
There were a few shoves and shoulders, some intentional and some not, on the way to
my locker.

After getting my books, I had two choices: head to class early or join the group
of boys standing in a corner by more lockers. Dave had already joined them, laughing
about something. They were my friends too, my group I was meant to go stand by,
like we were all prison inmates. Other batches found places to congregate all over
Alexander, and the unlucky ones (or lucky ones, depending on your view point) were
the lone wolfs. I wondered where my sister was. Probably in the locker room still,
putting on her schools clothes, free from this mockery at least until her season was
over.

As for me, I’d made my decision when I’d gotten up this morning, while I ate
my cereal and lackadaisically brushed my teeth. It was a lone wolf kind of day.

The room was empty when I arrived. I thanked the gods. Switching off the
lights and leaving just a crack in the doorway, I took a seat in the back by the window.

Cool dawn light seeped in from outside, where there was a soccer field that
gave way to woods. Two deer posed in the threshold between the mowed grass and
the trees. I made a burrow with my baggy sweatshirt (a weathered cloak in my mind)
on the cold desk for my head to rest while I gazed at the doe and its fawn. This would
be how I passed the time until class—staring, maybe giving them names, wondering
where they were off to next. When something startled the deer and they took off, my
stomach clenched a little in worry. I wanted to go with them, to see what thrills
awaited them in the forest morning, but of course I couldn’t. But one of these days, maybe.

I focused again on the hush of the vent and not the chatter and shouts of students beyond the door. My forehead tilted down until I was lost in the lovely darkness of my own sleeves. In minutes I fell asleep.

“So you tell it this time, Jimmy,” Mr. Branch said amidst laughs. “The part where you go flying out of your desk.”

There was the beginning of a long geometric proof on the board but it hadn’t been talked about in twenty minutes. We’d taken a break—a common occurrence in Mr. Branch’s class.

Mr. Tomas Branch sat on top of his desk, wearing a short sleeve buttoned shirt and a Columbus Blue Jackets Tie. He tossed the chalk from one hand to the other. Another common activity in class was “watch Mr. Branch try and throw the chalk across the room so it landed on the ridge of the board.” He’d succeeded twice. Both times, the class had lost it in euphoria, and no more math had been talked about on either occasion. He wore glasses, was about medium height and had thinning, greasy brown hair. I knew he was twenty-nine from a story he’d told in class, but I’d pegged him as older, due to his general lack of care when it came to his appearance. Or really, when it came to anything.

My face felt hot. I looked at Dave in the seat next to me, who eagerly awaited my telling. He’d first brought it up to Mr. Branch, seeing it in person a few periods
ago. I didn’t even think it was all that funny, but I suppose even semi-comical things became hilarious when you were stuck in the monotony of class. You sought out anything amusing, a story or a decent joke you’d heard at lunch, and no one enjoyed them more than Mr. Branch, who often told ones of his own.

“Well, I, uh…was in a deep sleep,” I began. “And Ms. Attili slammed a detention slip on my desk right next to my face. And then I guess I just fell outta my chair.”

Dave and Mr. Branch looked at each other knowing that was not all, that there was more laughter to be milked.

“Wait just a minute,” Dave said. “You didn’t just fall out of your chair. You flew! Not to mention the yelp. Like Ms. Attilli was some sorta monster!”

Mr. Branch’s shoulders heaved as he laughed in his silent way. He even took of his glasses and rubbed the insides of his eyes.

It had been a strange way to wake up. I’d spent the classes afterward trying to remember what had been going on in my dreams, but there was only haze. It must have been something intense though, something important that had made me wake in such an acrobatic fashion. I wanted to know what it was. I never brought my dream journal with me to school but I wish I had today, even if kids would have looked at me like I was an underwhelming animal at the zoo.

Then again, Ms. Attili’s presence was probably enough to scare Strider himself. She competed in weight lifting competitions and had a stare that made your soul squirm in its seat, if such a thing had a seat. After I woke I’d tried to avoid her dark
brown eyes as she talked about the Taiping Rebellion, but at times I looked at her anyways, even while holding my yellow detention slip. She was intense but she was also beautiful.

As the two laughed harder I went to say more to defend myself but when I opened my mouth, no words came out. I was too tired to care. About detention, about basketball, about any of it. Before I knew it I began to laugh, joining Dave and Mr. Branch and the other students who giggled along, while the rest starred awkwardly at us or the clock or the door.

Chatter and shouts intertwined with the scrapes of chairs on the dirty stone floor of the cafeteria. I chewed my peanut butter and jelly sandwich and watched Anthony Bellflower stare at Olivia Harley, a senior who played on Joanie’s tennis team. She stood pondering which kind of pop she wanted from the machine. It was elbow-touchingly crowded at the table. I never knew why we didn’t just split up into two tables, but I suppose that was lunchtime behavior. No one wanted to be the one who suggested it because then they’d be the one who got kicked out, forced to eat alone. I wanted to be alone, but not facing all these people. It was a strange conundrum. You couldn’t just isolate yourself on an island if there was only a river separating you from troubled lands. I imagine it’s a worry the Mattaponi and the other tribes of Abya Yala (never heard of Abya Yala? Give it a look, my mom told me about it) had to tug-of-war with for awhile, until they were wiped away by the descendants of most of us, including my father. Sometimes I feel two heritages
wrestling inside of me and it makes me nauseated, like I’ve been reading in the car for hours.

Anthony Bellflower’s gaze followed the senior-looking girl until she was out of sight, blocked by a lunch aide. “Old hag is in the way,” he said, and took a bite of his pizza pocket. Orange grease dripped on his shirt, which read “Hollister: Island Fresh’s Surfer King.” It gripped his large, undefined arms like a bandage. I wondered whether Anthony had ever surfed in his life or if an “Island Fresh” really existed.

“That girl was developed though, man,” he said.

There were some nods and um-hums. A pale girl named Marisa, who rarely talked, stared at him and then looked away. Her friend Sami, who made up for Marissa’s quiet nature, said that he was dreaming if he ever thought he’d get with her. Sami was from New York, and she didn’t talk like the rest of us. All her “ers” came out as “uhh’s,” and she wore the same green sweatpants most days of the week.

Anthony ignored her, and instead asked: “You don’t agree?” I thought he was talking to Marisa but then I realized his gaze was on me.

“I, uh, didn’t really see,” I finally said, and took another bite.

“You didn’t see?”

“Not really.”

Anthony looked around the table and smiled and it reminded me of Joe Pesci from that film Goodfellas I’d watched with my dad once. “Fudge packer,” he said.

Some of the kids laughed. I didn’t say anything. Truth be told, I didn’t know exactly what the term meant.
“Hey man,” Dave chimed in. “She wasn’t that incredible.”

“Oh ho,” Anthony said. “Here’s his runner fagot friend standing up for him.”

“I thought she was damn incredible,” Sami said.

Dave bit his lip, ready to say more to defend himself, but just then, Stu Taggart, with his Beatles haircut and small stature, came moseying back from the café, where he’d bought a large cup of French fries. They were glistening, hot, salty pieces of treasure. I hadn’t bought lunch in awhile. My family was on what they called the “reduced lunches list.” Lately I just couldn’t muster the will to go up there and tell the cashier I was on that list while the swarm of students revolved around me, most of them carrying these wallets with thick cloves of cash bursting out of them. My voice felt weak in most places, but up there, in the lunch lines, it felt uncomfortably microphoned.

Hence I’d been packing this whole year, and I’d grown tired of PB and J’s.

Anthony was looking at them too, the fries, even though he’d just purchased the pizza pocket and a pack of nutterbutters. “Hey. Stu,” he said.

Stu looked up at him as he struggled to wedge himself back into the crowded circle. “Yeah?” he said quickly.

Anthony held his pointer finger up into the air, like he was about to recite some wisdom of Benjamin Franklin. Then, the finger rotated, now pointing toward the cup in Stu’s hand. “One fry.”

Stu looked from the cup to Anthony. “Uh, sure. Yeah, one fry. Go ahead.”

Anthony took the longest one of the bunch.
“Stu,” Sami said.

I could see a crease of worry tuck on Stu’s forehead.

“One fry,” she said.

Stu grudgingly offered her the cup, and two hands went for a fry. Sami’s and another kid, Ray, who wore glasses and golf polos. Both of them had taken two.

Stu protested, but was cut off because then Dave had gone for them, grabbing just one, but knocking the cup out into the center of all of us by accident. Then, a throng of hands clouded the table, including one of my own, and amidst the laughter and the bumping into each other we all heard Stu groan “what the fuck guys?” but it was too late. The cup lied crumpled on the table like road kill. Only the tiniest, burnt stubs were left to eat.

I felt bad for Stu. What could he do? Challenge all of us to a fight? Tell the lunch aides? Truth was you were helpless to the behavior of everyone else. Kids ruled here, and the ones with the greatest reign were the ones who were most aggressive. I didn’t want to be king. I just didn’t want to be in Stu’s shoes either. And there’d be times when I was that semester, mostly from my quitting the basketball team.

Next period, I felt strange stinging stomach pains, and I suppose it was karma for mixing those salty fries in with the daily peanut butter, jelly, and bread.
Chapter II

It was age discrimination, Joanie concluded. She was the only sophomore on a bus of juniors and seniors and they stared at her for it, unable to talk amongst each other openly until she’d covered her delicate ears with headphones.

Joanie’s leg pulsed and thumped in bitterness and excitement. She tried to tune out their chatter, thinking about the tennis match ahead. She hoped a girl on the other team would send a forehand barreling right into Olivia Harley’s big floppy chest.

An hour earlier, as they dressed in the locker room for the away match, Olivia had paraded around, inspecting which members of the team were part of the “itty bitty titty committee.” Joanie had put on her clothes quickly, hating this cramped, damp cavern. She’d thought about her parent’s warm shower at home and the window that looked out into the dark, piney woods. Since he’d quit the basketball team, her brother Jimmy was probably home by now, reading a book on the couch or taking a nap. Even though they rarely saw each other during their different after school sports, she still felt abandoned by him for his quitting. He wasn’t allowed to be home while she tried to evade girls with big chests and ride on a bus in which no one talked to her all the way to Lancaster.

Joanie had been moved up to the varsity tennis team a few weeks earlier, the only girl in her grade to be promoted. Her friends on JV had a home match today. She felt bitterness towards them too.

“Jeremy definitely wants me,” a tall girl named Katie was saying in the seat behind her. Joanie kept feeling kicks in her back through the worn fake leather.
“Jeremy wants everyone.” Another senior said, this one, the unmistakable deep voiced Olivia. “But he is hot. He’s in my gym class and I love to watch how hard he tries in flag football.”

“Yeah well lucky you,” Katie said. “All I have in my gym class is a bunch of skeletal cross country boys.”

Joanie thought about Dave Namara, Jimmy’s best friend who ran cross-country (if Jimmy had such a thing, his friends rarely came over any more). He was very nice and goofy. She remembered him spilling a glass of milk all over the kitchen floor once when he’d been over for dinner. She’d tried not to laugh, especially when he said “my deepest apologies.” Now, listening to their conversation, she wanted to turn around and tell Olivia and Katie that they could shut the hell up, that she’d be glad to have a cross country runner in her gym class and that every football player she knew was an arrogant oaf.

The girls fell silent behind her so Joanie took a breath and let it go. Olivia was her new doubles partner, so they needed to start getting along if they had any chance of going to states. She stared out the window and listened to a Fleetwood Mac CD she’d taken from her mom’s thick book of discs. Tree after tree wisped by, either already bare or ablaze with color this time of year. She was just beginning to let the woman’s dreamy sounding voice take her away when Olivia spoke up again, breaking Joanie’s pre-game trance.

“Can you believe I gotta play with her today?”
Joanie’s face flushed with sudden heat. *I can’t believe I have to play with you,* she thought back.

“She’s such a try hard, isn’t she?” She continued. “And she’s so gangly and long like a mantis. Not to mention…” Olivia was especially quiet when she said this. Joanie lowered the volume in her headphones. “She’s gotta be part black. I mean she’s so fucking athletic and fast—it’s just annoying.”

“That’s all she’s got though,” Katie said. “We have the technique, and the experience.”

Joanie had dark black hair and olivey skin, like her mom. She liked looking different than most at Alexander High, who were all the color of orange or pink-tinted computer paper. She was a mystery. People guessed about her and she never really gave them any answers, and she liked it that way.

What she really hated about her appearance was all the hair that grew on her body. Her arms almost looked the same as Jimmy’s. She often wore long sleeves just to cover them up. One of these days she was going to muster the courage to just shave them, but then she thought about what everyone would say, what Olivia would say. And wouldn’t the hair only come back even grizzlier?

“I’m about done with this shit, honestly,” Olivia said.

There was a short silence from Katie. “With the season?” She sounded a little surprised.

“I mean it’s cold outside. We didn’t even get hoodies this year.”
She sounded like a five year old who didn’t get the right doll for Christmas.

Once again, Joanie fought the urge to turn around and tell Olivia off, that tanking was not an option, and that Coach Shirkie would bench her ass.

Olivia lived in one of the fancy developments on the other side of town, where a bunch of men had destroyed a forest her and Jimmy had hiked in a few years back. She’d met few people she liked from these developments. “Waterford Woods” was the name of one of them, she recalled now. More and more kids had been coming from Columbus and filling up the town. It would be fun to t.p. Olivia’s house, Joanie thought.

She decided to open up her book bag and find tonight’s math homework. All the swirling and snarling numbers nauseated her at first look. Jimmy was always going on about how funny Mr. Branch was, but Joanie thought otherwise. She had his class first period, and the guy barely seemed alive at 7:20 in the morning. He just mumbled most of the time and his writing looked like some secret code comprised of little tally marks.

She didn’t make it far into the homework because Coach Shirkie came sauntering down the aisle. He seemed to bump into some of the girls on purpose as he made his way towards the back and sure enough plopped himself down next to Joanie, right on top of her coat.

“Little lamb,” he said. Joanie had never asked him the origin of her nickname. She didn’t want to know.
Coach Shirkie was a short man with thick, hairy forearms (made Joanie feel better about herself), who really didn’t know much about tennis. He made them run a lot, and just watched them trot back and forth from one side of the courts to the other like they were cattle. He used nicknames like “legs” and “little lamb” as much as he used their real names.

Joanie missed JV Coach Day, who was funny and young and got along well with her and her friends. She even missed her dad as a coach, back in the day, as demanding and ridiculous as he was, shouting one liners like “fatigue makes cowards of us all!” at her and Jimmy. She was always the more coachable one, he would tell her. He was supposed to make it to her match tonight, if he could leave work early enough. Even though he shouted mostly embarrassing, rarely motivational tidbits through the fence, Joanie hoped he’d come. She felt especially alone on the bus today.

“Squeeze in,” Coach Shirkie said, squishing Joanie closer to the window. She could hear giggles from behind her. Her legs would not stay still. They shook like old vibrating mattresses that ate quarters. Of course she’d had to pick the seat by the heater, which gushed out breath after breath of artificial heat. There was no way she was taking off her sweatshirt though, she thought.

“Feelin good?” He asked her.

“Alright,” Joanie said.

“Don’t be nervous,” and there was his callused hand, roughly massaging the back of her neck.
“I’m not. Really,” she said, and meant it. She might have wanted to challenge Olivia to a scrap and definitely wanted to tell Coach Shirkie to please go sit back up front, where he belonged, but she wasn’t nervous. Once she got on the court and the score tags read 0-0, she’d be ready. It was always like that with her. Amidst games, whether basketball, tennis, or volleyball, she just competed, flowed, thought about nothing else.

But until then, she had this bus ride to persevere.

“We need you to be a beast on the net today,” he was saying, his coffee breath seeping onto her clothes and her bags. “Olivia will take care of her service games.”

“What about my service games?” Joanie asked.

Coach Shirkie’s wrinkled old face flexed into an excited grin. His grip on Joanie’s neck tightened just for a second and then he let go, getting ready to go bother another girl. “I like to see you get a little indignant. Gives some spunk to your game. And we need that.” He let the eeee in need sputter like it was a race car engine.

Joanie pulled out a fake smile for him, and was relieved when he wedged himself out of the seat, continuing on his rounds.

She tried to return to the trees that whizzed by and the dreamy music, but the portable CD player kept skipping and choking and repeating the same line over and over. Joanie hated when that happened. It made her think some demonic spirit was trying to get in touch with her. She wanted one of those IPod’s some of the girls had bought recently, but they cost an unfathomable amount of money.
When they arrived at Lancaster High School, Joanie asked if Olivia wanted to stretch and talk strategy. In what was an expected rebuff, Olivia said she didn’t need to stretch, and that she’d do what she always did—just play. They were new double partners, Joanie wanted to remind her, and that no stretching led to injuries, but there wasn’t time. The bus had arrived late. The opposing team’s coach wanted to get matches started so there wasn’t the risk of having to turn on the big overhead lights.

Joanie minded the couple of cracks rippled randomly on the court. Olivia was staring into the stands and the lawn chairs spread out on the grass, looking for somebody. There was a football game going on somewhere around here because Joanie could hear the very distant liveliness of cheerleaders. She pretended they were shouting their little songs for her. She actually started to chuckle quietly at the thought of cheerleaders parading the tennis courts, cartwheeling in front of the net and building a human pyramid. She imagined serving a ball right at the pyramid and watching it crumble as the cheerleaders screamed and fled.

“Alright, let’s go girls!” Coach Shirkie said in a gameshow host kind of voice. He paraded around the many matches with a clipboard, but he kept his eye mostly on the first doubles Court, where Joanie and Olivia played, Court 2. If Logan registered a win in their match and just one other, it’d be enough to beat Lancaster.

“Keep an eye out for my serve,” Olivia told her. “It can get a little wacky sometimes.”

Joanie nodded confusedly and took her spot up by the front of the net. She twisted the grip of the racket in her palms. No sign of her dad yet.
The Lancaster doubles team was slow but precise, and hit just about everything back, even most of Joanie’s slams. Olivia, besides her serve, could barely get the ball over. Twice she whiffed completely like she was just lackadaisically waving a “Ponderosa Dinner Sale” banner back and forth on the sidewalk. 

Coach Shirkie shouted that Joanie had to go for more balls, to be more aggressive. Joanie thought about sending one his way, knocking him and his clipboard flat onto the cement. “Don’t you see my partner?” She mumbled. 

They began to lose their hold on the match. Joanie either plooped every one of her serves into the net or sent it flying. Her chapped knuckles started to bleed and itch. She was thirsty. She missed JV matches, where the other girls didn’t hit back everything with so much spin and sizzle that it nearly made you drop your racket. She tried to give it right back to them but the stupid yellow ball was like a snitch. It just kept shifting at the last second so she’d hit it awkwardly with the edge of her racket. After one terrible hit that sent the ball way up into the clouds, a yell escaped her and she smacked her hand hard against her thigh. It stung.

“Jesus, calm down crazy,” Olivia said. 

“I like the intensity, let’s go!” Coach Shirkie boomed from behind. 

They were near defeat by the time her dad showed up, lawn chair in one hand, newspaper in the other. Joanie could see him biting his lip at the sight of the score, like he was hastily devising a plan to escape a burning building. He wanted to come out onto the court, she knew. “That’s alright, girls, one point at a time!” He said, clapping his paper into his elbow.
God how his voice carried, Joanie thought. And of course Jimmy wasn’t with him. He never came and now there was no excuse. Even though he had nothing to do at home now except take his walks in the woods and read his books, he still couldn’t come watch one of her matches. He could have read here, at least. And there were tons of woods right outside the fence.

Not that I care, she reassured herself.

They lost another game, only one more until the match was over. “It’s your serve,” Olivia said. And then, quieter, but still audible. “We might as well just call it.”

More claps. A cacophony of phrases from her dad and Coach Shirkie. “Like you’re just throwing up apples in the backyard Joanie!” She clenched her hand and watched a thin line of red fill up a crack in her knuckle. She hated to lose. More than anything. She bounced the ball twice onto the concrete and back into her hand, nearly losing it because of her angry, mangled grip. So much for her flow. Olivia caught Joanie’s gaze, turned away from her near the front of the net, crouched and lifting her heel one at a time like she was ready to pounce.

What a faker, Joanie thought. She just wants to show off her butt to the audience.

Alright, here we go. She vowed to make this serve a doozy, a release of frustration. She tossed the ball higher than normal up into the air, so she almost lost it in the darkening sky. When it finally came back down, she swung her racket around, ready to send the yellow pest that had been evading her the whole match into oblivion. In the moment before she struck it, her feet switched position, whether on purpose or
by accident, she really wasn’t sure. Although, she’d never shifted her footing like that before, not right in the trajectory of her doubles partner.

When the ball collided with Olivia’s head, several gasps, a couple of “ooohs” and “holy shit!” all echoed through the fence and onto the court. Olivia fell to the ground, but it looked staged to Wendy. She meshed her hand in her hair, getting up one limb at a time.

“You alright Olivia? Shake it off honey!” Shirkie called from a few courts over.

Joanie quickly went for her second ball beneath her skirt as if nothing had happened, trying to force back a jittery smile. “Fault,” she even said loudly. She tried not to think about what all the spectators were thinking, this new crazy sophomore with the hairy arms. As she bounced the second ball on the concrete a couple of times she suddenly noticed Olivia was done shaking it off. She was now marching Joanie’s way, not wanting to talk.

“You fucking…” she said.

Joanie marveled at Olivia’s grip on her racket. If only she held it like that in the match, she thought.

“Girls hold up there now!” Joanie heard Shirkie shout. She could hear him struggling to jog over. The other players had all halted their matches to check out the commotion on Court 2. Even the distant cheerleaders had ceased their chants, Joanie realized, though this was surely coincidence.

Olivia held up her racket, ready to strike.
Fine, Joanie thought. If it was a swordfight she wanted, she’d get one. Her
and Jimmy had been dueling each other with rolled up newspaper since they were five.
Chapter III

I want to tell you the story of the doe.

When we were still in elementary school, Joanie and I would embark on adventures into the woods behind our house.

We had some epic journeys, the two of us. I’d drawn maps of our forest, all the creeks, the hill we used to pretend was Everest, Grandmother Oak, the biggest of all the trees that had branches more brawny than the world’s strongest man. We are nothing compared to these trees, and The Mattaponi Tribe knew that. Almost all the tribes of Abya Yala lived that way—in harmony with the world, grateful to be part of it. Now, they are just ghosts. Sometimes I imagine them whispering by me when I walk.

This particular excursion was one of the last Joanie had actually wanted to partake in. I could already tell she was a little reluctant, especially because the sky threatened rain, but there we were, maps in hand, at the onset of the woods, me in the lead.

Our mission this time was to reach somewhere new, to get beyond the map I’d drawn. We followed the creek for a good few miles, crossed it, scaled the mountain, passed where the trees panned out into a small barley field and then returned even denser, pinier. This section of the woods I called “The Dark Forest.” Up to then, we’d never reached the end of it.

We navigated the gloom, the sky the color of slate high up above us. I guided Joanie along, always noting where to avoid the pricker bushes. A few times she asked
when we would go back, but I either pretended not to hear or claimed there was something waiting for us just a bit farther.

Bare branches looked like the mangled hands of an old witch. The wind made them claw at us. Joanie became more insistent on turning around, and just as I was about concede, the trees began to pan out. Ahead, I could see glimpses of the sky, spots of glowing orange like dying embers. We ran.

The trees abruptly halted. We stopped as our shoes met a road of refined silver rocks. Two endless beams of metal passing through the land. Railroad tracks.

I’d have to make a new map, I remember thinking. Beyond the tracks was a sea of more floating grain, and hills beyond that, which were actually getting uncomfortably close to the setting sun. We’d have to make haste on the way back, especially with all the clouds above. Still, I breathed deeply and took in the sight,imagining what lay beyond those far hills.

More of the same, Jimmy, I’m sure Joanie would have said if I’d voiced it. She wore a face that was also worried about the draining daylight.

“Let us embark,” I said, and it was then that Joanie took notice of the doe.

She grabbed my shoulder and pointed about a basketball court’s length down the tracks. Wounded, was my first thought. And in need of help.

As we neared it I could see that its blood had dyed the rocks around it pink. It was lying pitifully down right in between the two metal beams, eyeing us curiously, resigned to the spot like it’d been in prison so long it didn’t want to enter the real
world anymore. It reminded me of Joanie and myself, after we’d both gotten our tonsils and adenoids out, lying nearly comatose on the couch.

We were five feet from it now, and still it barely acknowledged us. I could see its chest heave just a little and then deflate back down again. Blood was caked to its right leg, some of it still wet and dripping.

Of all places, why had it chosen to lie here? Did it somehow know a train would come, and wanted a quick death?

“Jump up and down,” Joanie said. “And shout.”

We acted like predators, raising our hands high and pleading it to move with the deepest, most monstrous yells we could manage.

“We gotta take it off of here,” Joanie finally said.

Part of me wanted to protest, to ask her “seriously?” but I swallowed it. Instead, I took a deep breath, for some reason thinking the moment we touched this doe we’d both be teleported to some new place.

We attempted to pick it up, but failed shamefully. I’d never felt so helpless, so embarrassingly underqualified. Its coat was prickly, not good blanket material. It withdrew from us, blowing rapid hot air through its nostrils.

Looking at Joanie, I knew she wanted to try again. She’d come with me this far, even when she’d wanted to turn back. I wasn’t sure if we were doing the doe any good, but if Joanie wanted to carry it off the tracks, I’d help her.
In what seemed more like an attack than a rescue, we both grabbed the back of it and lifted. I could feel the doe convulse out of our grasps, its wild muscles far beyond what we could manage. Joanie gave a muted, ghost-like shrieked.

A gallon’s worth of dark red blood had flooded onto her clothes, seeping from the doe’s thigh—some sort of puncture wound. Had it been shot? I couldn’t believe how much there was of the stuff, how horrifyingly quick it had leaked onto my sister.

I know it wasn’t her blood, but there was still something unsettling about seeing her covered in it, knowing that it wasn’t just spilled cranberry sauce. Blood’s blood, no matter whose it is. Plus, her face was contorted, like she could’ve just been stabbed, unable to digest all the pain.

She held onto the doe for another second but it was squirming and kicking and huffing more hot air at us. Even this wounded young one was too heavy for our small frames.

And then, as if we were part of a movie, *Stand by Me* 2 maybe, two loud sounds echoed our way, teammates in their alarming power. Thunder bellowed, and there was a train.

It was barreling down the tracks, breathing out a boa constrictor-thick trail of smoke, dark yellow eyes staring us down.

Joanie and I didn’t speak, standing there as if all of this was frozen in time. Except for the train, of course.

When the realization set it in, we both backed away from the doe like traitors. I could feel drops of rain wetting my hair as we ran towards the trees.
I’m not sure if Joanie looked back, but I couldn’t bear it.

The thinning canopy did little to shield us from the now heavy rain. I knew the doe was still dominating her thoughts, still stained somewhere in her mind. By the time we got home, we were both soaked, the blood washed away from Joanie’s clothes.

I was thinking of that adventure now, and how Joanie became much more grudging about trips into the woods, when she and Dad came into the house, talking. I’d started a fire in the living room and was reading. Mom was upstairs sleeping, victim to another one of her migraines. She’d been getting them a lot lately, spending more and more time alone and upstairs. I worried about her. My parents no longer slept in the same room most nights.

A breath of late fall air came floating by me. The flames under the mantle danced. The two of them were taking off their shoes and coat, still chatting about the match.

“All I’m saying, Joan, is that if by chance it was intentional, well…you should try to keep a cooler head out there.”

“Did it look intentional?” Joanie’s voice was screechier than normal, which meant she was frustrated.

“Hard to say,” Dad said safely.

“You saw how lazy Olivia was being, didn’t you?”

“Yes, she needs to pick it up for sure. Your coach should do something about that.”
Joanie was silent, probably brooding as she hung up the coats.

“All I’m saying,” Dad went on, “is you gotta play ball with these girls, the coach too. I know it can be tough, but you’re too talented to jeopardize playing time by getting in fights.”

At this point I’d taken a break from Succession Destiny, drawn into their conversation.

“So you think I did do it,” Joanie said, walking into the living room.

Dad followed her in. “Now I didn’t say that.” He rustled my hair, saying “hey buddy” to me with a smile, but I could tell in his eyes he was still sad that I quit the basketball team. It was perhaps his biggest joy, watching the two of us play sports, and I suspected that even more than Joanie’s many activities, he lived for my basketball games, probably pretending it was him down there on the court handling the ball and getting to the foul line.

“You lose?” I asked.

Joanie didn’t respond, which meant yes. She was slumped on the couch now, gazing into the fire, lips cracked and flaky. The skin around her eyes looked swollen, like she’d had an allergic reaction to some of that mascara stuff she was always pasting on them now. Had she been crying?

Dad sat down on the couch too. “Your sister duked it out with another player,” he said. “Until the coach came and broke it up.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Olivia Harley. That lazy bitch.”
Joanie’s words discomfited the both of us. I heard her swear a lot at school but normally she refrained from cuss words at home.

My dad scowled at her, but it did little to change her demeanor. She was still smoldering.

I knew Olivia from lunch period. Anthony Bellflower and a lot of the other guys at my table liked to stare at her when she walked by.

“Besides,” my dad went on, “that match didn’t mean much. Conference tourney is still a couple weeks away.” His voice seemed to echo around the room and it was the last thing we said for awhile.

I poked the fire and returned to my book. Dad asked where mom was and sauntered upstairs. Now that work and the sporting events were over it was like his battery turned down to low until he went to sleep. My guess was that tonight would be a find/make what you can for dinner night. Outside it was very dark now.

“You do homework for Branch yet?” I forgot Joanie was still sitting there on the couch, just watching the flames flicker. Her voice had loosened up some.

“No,” I said.

“Me neither.”

“Maybe look at it later?” I asked.

“Maybe,” she agreed. We had several of the same classes but none in the same period.

I went back to my book but after a few sentences Joanie spoke again. “Any regrets about quitting?”
“Nope,” I said, but felt a wave of apprehension run through my legs. There’d be boys on the team who’d make sure I’d regret it at least a little bit. Older varsity players, who I’m sure would call me a pussy, shove me into a locker or two, knock my books out of my hands. I should start using a book bag, I thought.

I also wondered if Alexa Grinnel would look at me the same way on game days, when she’d be expecting me in my jersey. The jersey was a source of confidence, one of the few things that kept me at least somewhat in the realm of normal at Alexander High. Without it, I had no artifact, no secret talisman to help me fit in.

I could fake sick on game days, I thought. Avoid the place altogether.

“You’re so lucky,” Joanie said.

“Why don’t you quit?”

She shook her head, a slight smirk on her face now. “I could never…”

Deep down, I knew it was true. Despite all the annoying teammates, the endless hours of travel and practice, the coaches, Joanie would never quit tennis, or softball for that matter, come spring. She’d only stopped basketball because the other two sports interfered with it. I’d be lying if I said I was the athlete, the one driven enough to go to college on a scholarship. Sure, I could rely on speed and some raw strength to drive to the basket for an and-one, but I never felt passion from the roar of the crowd or the sound of balls bouncing on hardwood.

It was in the woods that I felt my spirit soar.
Outside, a full moon was shining down upon the now mostly bare trees. They waltzed calmly in the sway of the wind, while the glimmer of the fire was break dancing madly in the reflection of the window.

I didn’t know what school had in store tomorrow, but I didn’t care. I was happy now, here in my chair with a good story in my hand and the fire ablaze next to me.

Hours later, getting ready for bed, I peeked into my mom’s room. She was in her chair by the window, a book in her hand. *Ceremony*, it was called.

“Is that good?” I asked her, cautiously stepping in.

She turned slowly around.

_Your mom deals with depression_, Dad had told me once in the car, somewhat out of the blue. _From what?_ I’d asked him. He gripped the wheel tightly for awhile and finally said: _I don’t really know for sure, buddy. Her father, I think._

I’d never met my grandpa on that side. He’d died before I was born. But his name, Carol Brownfoot, seemed to float around our house like a draft you could never get rid of. Say it and I swear you cast this strange spell around our house, evoking a small portion of his spirit. He was the only man I knew of with the name Carol.

“I like the main character. So that’s something.”

My mom now slept in what was our office, den, guest bedroom, whatever you wanted to call it. It was a shabby, small square with old windows and a creaky
wooden floor. She’d done nothing to decorate it, except bring in a few of her books and a basket of clothes.

“How are you feeling?” I probed.

I knew I shouldn’t have asked it. A look of embarrassment snuck onto her face. She ran a hand through her messy hair.

“School was fine,” I said quickly, and went on talking, making sure to focus the conversation on me. “Boring as always. But I’m glad to have more time at home. I needed a break from basketball.”

“Do you think you’ll play for the rec league?” She asked.

“Maybe. I think sign ups might be over.”

She sighed deeply.

I thought about sitting down on the bed but something held me back, standing in the doorway.

“Tomorrow we’ll read together,” she said. “Maybe take a walk.”

I hoped she meant it. I could never really be sure. When Mom turned gloomy, the word tomorrow often just meant leave me alone.

As I shut the door I took one more look at her. Years ago I’d asked my dad who causes it, but of course there’s never really a who. It was all just inside of her. That could be me one day, I thought.
Chapter IV

The cafeteria was mostly deserted, but still it pulsed from the long day of laughter and shouts. Wrappers and crumped-up paper balls littered the floor. A janitor was contently sweeping and whistling. We, the disobedient kids, sat three to a table, patrolled by the old bug-eyed detention monitor, Mrs. Kipcar. She sat cross-legged at a table by herself, engaged in a Sudoku puzzle. Every five minutes or so she’d look up and scan the room for any sign of mischief.

I’d been in detention before. I had a habit of leaving class to use the bathroom and never coming back. I love to wander. This school wasn’t all that bad when the halls were clear.

I hadn’t told my parents of my newest reason for staying after. With any luck, my parents would never find out. Sure, I’d miss the bus home, but Alexander High was only a few miles from where I lived. I knew a shortcut through some woods.

Sami from my lunch period sat next to me, drawing and chewing a hefty wad of gum, her jaw churning loudly. I’d asked her what she was here for. Her response: “Innocent. Got screwed.” The other member of our table was some senior I didn’t know. He slept on the sleeve of his hoodie and snored like it was the best rest he’d gotten in months.

I sat and envisioned what this exact spot was like five hundred years ago. Trees, probably. No sign of civilization whatsoever. Except of course my mom’s ancestors. When I feel embarrassed, bored, unable to cope with what’s going on around me, I pretend it’s five hundred years ago.
A heavy door opened a little ways down the hall. The gymnasium. Guys of all sizes, clad in practice jerseys came jostling out into the hall, on their way to the water fountain.

I dipped my head a little lower. “What are you drawing?” I asked Sami.

She looked at me, appreciating my interest. “I just free draw. I never know until it’s all finished.”

From the look of her disconnected lines and shadings, it still had a ways to go. Mrs. Kipcar peered up in our direction, aware of some hint of talk. All I needed was for her to squawk at me and draw the attention of the basketball team over here. The downfall of Jimmy Atwater—they’d say during layup drills—all the way from small forward to delinquent.

Just then, I sensed movement close by, to the side of me and close to the floor. Some scurrying creature looking for food scraps?

It was Dave. He was crawling like a soldier towards me, book and running bag attached to his back, dressed in sweats and his face still red from running seven miles or maybe more.

I looked at him like he really was a GI who’d crawled all the way from Iraq to Logan, Ohio.

“Hey guys,” he whispered.

Sami perked up. Girls never did that when I entered a room. We asked him what the hell he was doing here.
“Why I’ve come to liberate Jimmy, of course. You need a ride home, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but how am I gonna escape?” I asked.

“It’ll be easy,” Dave said. He turned to Sami and smiled slyly at her, like the two of them could have been Bonnie and Clyde just for thirty seconds. “Would you mind being the distraction?”

“Not at all,” she said.

Suddenly a voice shot our way. Mrs. Kipcar. “What’s going on over there?”

Dave ducked down. With no time to lose, Sami shot up from her chair. Others eagerly watched the commotion, happy to turn away from their homework.

As Sami ambled her way over to Kipcar, I packed my stuff, waiting for the opportune moment to calmly, slowly collapse to the floor.

“How’s the puzzle goin? Need help?”

“No,” growled Kipcar instinctually, but then after a moment: “well yes, yes I do actually.” It was uncommon to offer The Old Bird (as many called her at Alexander, not the most original nickname, but accurate) help with her puzzles. She’d been surely expecting an inquiry about a trip to the bathroom.

“A second pair of eyes can help figure out those last ones, am I right?” Sami asked.

Kipcar creased her eyebrows and nodded. “Yes, I suppose a quick glance…”

Now was the time. I dipped down and out of sight. I could hear them still chatting vigorously about Sudoku as we scuttled out of the cafeteria, free.
I remember thinking this stunt could result in several more detentions, maybe even a suspension. It ended up causing a lot more than that. I often wonder how things could have been different if I’d just stayed in my seat, just told Dave I’d see him later.

We strolled the empty halls like boxing champions. Occasionally a teacher glided by us, armfuls of worksheets in their hands.

“My mom can’t get here for another twenty,” Dave said. “Let’s go to my locker real quick.”

We took the staircase two steps at a time. The second floor was more deserted than the first. I looked into empty classrooms we passed by, happy to see them no longer occupied.

Except, one was. We’d just passed at and I realized now I knew one of the men talking in there.

Mr. Branch. I’d never seen his face look like that before, so wrinkled and creased. He wasn’t smirking, telling a joke, or goofing off. He was arguing.

We walked another twenty feet, Dave’s locker just a little more ways down. “Did you see that?” I asked, my voice like I was in a movie theater.

“See what?” I could tell he was eager to get home. He kept walking but I stood where I was. Faint murmurings still drifted out of the classroom invitingly.

I backpedalled, not lifting the soles of my shoes off the floor. Their words became easier to hear.
“Not here.” The words belonged to Mr. Branch.

I stopped right before I crossed the doorway, huddled, ears straining.

“I can’t take this anymore.” It was the other man’s voice, apprehensive but still smooth somehow. “It’s only a matter of time before—”

“Not here,” Mr. Branch repeated, cutting him off sternly.

“Then where, Tom?”

“Millstone Tavern. No one’s ever there this time a day.” They fell silent.

They were packing things up. I heard a bag zip up, a scrape of a desk. “You shouldn’t have met me here.”

I walked as quickly as I could to Dave’s locker, putting a finger over my mouth. He looked at me quizzically.

“Tell you in a minute,” I whispered, closing his locker like a priest closes the bible after a reading. “We gotta hide.”

“What? Why?” Dave asked, but followed me trustingly into the nearest empty classroom.

We barely made it in before footsteps started pattering outside the hall, trailing away from us in a hurry.

I told him who I’d seen in the classroom, his strange demeanor, and some secret he didn’t want to voice there.

“And you didn’t recognize the other guy?” Dave asked.

“Didn’t get a good look,” I said. “But no.”
Dave seemed to be weighing his options. He fastened the straps of his backpack a little tighter.

“They’re meeting at Millstone Tavern,” I added.

“That old dump?”

“It’s not far from here. I know a shortcut through some woods.”

“You always say that, and they never seem to be much shorter.”

“Trust me on this one,” I said, surprised at the strong, salesman close-to-a-deal confidence flowing out of my mouth. It must have been the exhilaration in me. A real adventure. “Consider it a little more cross-country practice. That extra edge.”

Dave chuckled, unsure. He was scrambling for another excuse. I had to beat him to it.

“You got a cell-phone right?” I asked quickly. “Call your mom and tell her you were gonna come over my place.”

Dave rubbed an eye with his palm and sighed, preparing himself for whatever lay ahead. “We’re stopping at a vending machine on the way outta here,” he said.

It was our own flight to the ford. We flew through the audience of trees, invigorated by their windy cheers. My pores seeped with exhilaration, some restlessness finally being released from my body.

At church with my dad, the priest was always raising his hands in sporadic directions raving about a word called “redemption.” I just stared at him, stuffy and confused.
Now I understood it. You couldn’t find it in church, hiding under the pews or tucked inside one of the songbooks. It was here, in the swirling, singing free air of the woods. Vortexes of scattered leaves danced all around us. Cool mist fell upon our faces.

_We were on a journey._ I could feel my soul sifting through some invisible sieve. I was glad Dave trailed ten feet or so behind me, because I was getting emotional. I know it sounds funny, but a couple of tears had streamed down my face. He’d have thought I was nuts, but I just couldn’t help it. Things like that happen to me every once in awhile, like when I stick my head out the window of a car on a summer day. *Let these trees stretch on for infinity, I remember thinking, let me live in this moment forever.*

“You were right,” Dave said behind me, not out of breath, but definitely fatigued.

Ahead, the woods panned out. The drone of cars confronted us. As quickly as it had come, the feeling was gone. Still, I felt refreshed, ready for some investigative work.

Millstone Tavern, triangular roofed, paint chipping, reminded me of the trading post from *Oregon Trail*. It had not changed its décor to keep up with the wave of new, wealthy-development people who’d moved to Logan. There were three cars in the parking lot. One, an old grey truck, looked like it belonged there. The two smaller, shinier sedans seemed to have been hastily plopped barely inside the faded white lines.
I imagined get-away drivers shadily hunched in the front seats, smoking cigarette after cigarette.

Dave and I ducked down behind some brush. A bank of pine needles and some tall grass separated us from the side of the restaurant. Smoke streamed out from a metal pipe on the roof into the early evening sky.

“How much light we have left?” I asked. “Two hours?”

Dave scrunched the side of his cheek like he was chewing tobacco. “Maybe only one.”

I scanned the area, quickly discovering our next move—a large rusty dumpster situated not terribly far from the cars.

“I say we hide in there,” I said, shrugging my head towards the dumpster.

“Wait till they come out.”

“How do we know they’re even in there?” Dave asked.

“It’s gotta be them…and I recognize Branch’s car.” I had no idea what Mr. Branch’s car looked like.

“Maybe we could order something to go,” Dave said.

I ran to the dumpster and climbed in. A potpourri of foul, wet smells attacked me. Garbage bags congealed around my legs and torso. I had the sensation of sinking into my Aunt Rosie’s old waterbed. I tried to take a deep breath to calm down but the stench of decayed food just filled up my lungs.

Quick footsteps prattled from outside.
“Holy Jesus,” Dave said, and then he’d climbed his way in, landing on top of me. “This is freaking grotesque.”

“They can’t take that long,” I assured him.

We must have hung out with the cold garbage bags for forty-five minutes. At some point I felt something inside the black plastic squirm against my leg.

We’d been keeping the lid up a crack for light and air, but I was starting to think it was too noticeable. Maybe it was my senses begging for relief, but it suddenly hit me that this spot was cursed for spying.

“We should get closer,” I said. “So we can hear them for sure.”

Dave blew a jet of air out of his nostrils like a perturbed dragon.

I wedged my way out, nearly falling onto the blacktop. Movement caught my eye through the dimmed window. A couple of figures were paying the check.

I dived underneath the white truck, knocking my head on the bumper. Sparks of silver lighted up the top of my vision. I’d been bumped in the head hundreds of times driving to the hoop. I knew how to differentiate a minor whack from one that would leave a serious bump, cause a long-lasting migraine. This one was the latter.

I scrunched my eyes together tightly, trying to stay focused. One of my legs was lying in an oil puddle. I could feel the strange, syrupy wetness seeping through my jean leg.

The heavy wooden door of Millstone creaked open. As soon as it shut, the two resumed their talk like someone had just pressed play. Their tones had escalated since I’d last been eavesdropping.
“I told you…this idiot’s gonna be gone by next week.” The unknown man’s voice had lost a lot of its smoothness. Now his words came out in nervous, jagged stumbles. “And I’m not pulling another one of these stunts under this ‘Cheryl.’ You haven’t met her. She takes absolutely zero shit, and she’s organized.” Even in his discomfited state, I could tell the man was well put-together. His dark beard was perfectly trimmed, not too far down his neck and not invading his cheekbones either. He used some sort of gunk to style the wave in his hair.

They stood about the same height, though Mr. Branch was much brawnier and bigger-boned. “You’re not listening to me, Josh,” he said. It was hard to believe, this other side of Branch, this stern, team-captain side. *He could actually be a little frightening when he wanted to.* “I don’t wanna deal with her either,” he went on. “But we won’t have to if you document the payment this week. It’s the perfect time. When they’re switching superintendents.”

The other man, Josh, shook his head and even chuckled. Not a genuine chuckle, but the kind my dad let out when he’d been trying to assemble our new basketball hoop for six hours in the summer sun. “You are not the one who has to risk his job here,” he said. “His fucking life, for God’s sake, and you—you’re just in the shadows all the time!”

“Oh, come on now,” Mr. Branch said, and even countered with a laugh of his own, this one unbelieving.

“What?” Josh asked.

“You act like were joining the mafia.”
There it was. A sign of the Branch I knew. They were both laughing now, this one more legitimate. Josh seemed to be realizing perhaps he was being a little paranoid. The way the two of them chuckled together like that told me they weren’t just scheming partners. I was suddenly aware of how close they’d gravitated towards each other.

“But eventually they will find out,” Josh said.

“And we won’t be here when they do.” Mr. Branch slowly came to grasp both of Josh’s arms, right above the elbow. There was no protest, no grappling. Instead, they just embraced. I could hear the stretch of Josh’s leather jacket as arms squeezed his back.

What the hell was going on? I wanted a better view of their faces but I didn’t dare move.

“We’ll be long gone,” Mr. Branch said.

In the absence of talk I could suddenly hear my heart thumping loudly. Could they? Where they communicating with their faces, silently planning to look down under the truck and snatch me? I wondered what Dave was thinking, or if he’d passed out from the smells in the dumpster.

My stomach swirled like a whirlpool. I shivered from the sweat that stuck my shirt to my back. The fumes and the claustrophobia of being under the truck were starting to penetrate my defenses.

“Let’s get outta here,” one of them said. I wasn’t even sure who.

Doors shut. Cars churned on and drove away.
Chapter V

“We’re gonna fix this,” Coach Shirkie said.

He sat like an obtuse triangle in his saggy, rolling chair. A desk littered with papers and a couple of half-eaten protein bars separated the three of them—Joanie and Olivia on one side, Shirkie on the other. The faint pulse of running showers drifted into the office, like a relaxation CD of Niagara Falls. It wasn’t helping. Joanie just wanted to start practice already.

“I can’t have my first doubles team coming to blows,” he said. “So… what’s the problem, ladies?”

When asked so simply, Joanie thought, it was hard to come up with an answer. She’d let her partner respond.

“We don’t need marriage counseling,” Olivia said. She sounded oddly diluted to Joanie. “Tensions get high on the court. We’ll work it out.”

Coach Shirkie leaned forward, grabbing a squeeze ball that supposedly improved forearm strength off his desk. “That’s how you feel?” He gave it a good clench.

Olivia responded with a nod and an annoyed raise of her eyebrows.

“But can I trust you two to, uh…ensure that this won’t happen again?”

“Ask her,” Olivia said.

Both pairs of eyes landed upon Joanie. She’d been staring at the poster pasted on Coach Shirkie’s back wall. It read: “The Difference between Possible and Impossible is a Man’s Determination,” and beneath was such a man riddled with
muscle, climbing a red dusty rock. She used to climb a tall, artificial wall every year at the Hocking County Carnival. Joanie’s parents used to pay six bucks to let her race Jimmy up the wall to see who could win a stuffed animal or Looney Tunes basketball. She’d beaten her brother every time, and he always scowled afterwards like she’d cheated somehow.

Now Joanie wanted a chance to race the hot shot in the poster. “Yeah,” she finally said. “You can trust us.”

Coach Shirkie squeezed his grippy ball, suspicious, as the two girls left the office.

On the way out to the courts, Olivia surprised Joanie by actually calling her name, telling her to wait up as they walked outside.

“I know you hit me on purpose,” she said.

Joanie didn’t respond.

“But it’s whatever…” she zipped up her fleece jacket, “if you do something for me.”

“What?” Joanie asked.

“Come to a party of mine. This weekend.”

The offer felt like a telemarketer’s call, congratulating her on a new TV she just won. Joanie had seen things like this happen in movies like *The Princess Diaries* all the time. Despite the warning signals, her heart instinctually surged at the thought of going to a party full of upperclassmen. Who wouldn’t be tempted?
“You want me to come to your party,” Joanie repeated, adjusting the strap of her tennis bag.

“Play some beer pong,” Olivia said. “Or just chill. You can bring a friend. But just one. It’s Saturday.”

Cold wind rushed upon their faces. They trudged up the rocky incline toward the caged tennis courts, side by side. The cushiony pop of balls hitting rackets echoed out into the trees and up into the orange sky. Each night was coming sooner than the last.

Regardless of other reasons, Joanie thought, attending the party would make her chummier with some of the juniors and seniors on the team. Unless of course it was a trap—that was a still a very real possibility. She’d have to keep her guard up at Olivia’s house.

“Where do you live?” Joanie asked.

“2253Barton Drive. In Waterford Woods?”

Of course. The mansions by where you entered the freeway. Where they’d removed the old trees to bring in little manicured ones on the tree lawns.

As they reached the metal entry gate, Joanie sucked in her nervousness and gave a hard glance at her teammate. She needed to know what this invitation was all about.

Either Olivia possessed some impressive acting skills, or else she was being genuine. There were no repressed smirks on her face, no shady looks at some of the older teammates.
“What?” Olivia asked.

“Nothing,” Joanie said, and jogged to the other side of the court. She took out one of the tennis balls resting in her sweatshirt pouch, bounced it a couple of times on the concrete, and forehanded it to Olivia, who sent it back with more force. For once, they’d found a little rhythm.

They stopped at Speedway on the way home from practice, but only moments after Dad opened the door and lumbered out of the truck did he pop back in, startling Joanie. “My eagle-eye vision has spotted that the station down the road has cheaper gas,” he said.

Joanie grumbled and slumped further down in the seat, wanting to be home already. “Why didn’t your *eagle-eye vision* spot it while we were driving?”

He paid no attention, just pulled the lever down two quick notches toward his thigh. *The driving gear,* Joanie said in her head. She’d begun recently to survey her parents behind the wheel, as she’d be taking her Temps Test in just about a year. She wouldn’t bring it up to her dad, though, giving him reason to spiel about his supposedly spotless road record.

“If don’t you get a Gatorade?” He said as they turned into the Marathon, easing into a stop beside Pump Number Three. Joanie held out her hand, awaiting a couple of bills.

Inside the station, racks of bakery and snack nuts led her to the buzzing cold wall coolers. After a minute of deliberation, she picked one out and headed to the
register, where a stocky guy with a buzz haircut had both elbows propped upon the counter. He looked to be in high school, though not recognizable, with stubble beginning to take residence all around his chin. Something about his expression told Joanie he’d been watching her since the doors jingled her arrival.

“That all?” He asked.

Joanie looked down at the plastic pack of powdered doughnuts and realized she had just enough to buy them too. “Just the drink,” she said.

One side of his face perked up into a diminutive smile. “Guilty pleasure. I love those things too.”

Hot, flushy embarrassment crept up her body and onto her face. She hated how caught off-guard she could get. She didn’t know what to say so she just waited for him to hand her the change. Then, she turned around and walked out.

The cashier, on the other hand, didn’t seem to be phased. “Have a good night,” he said, still with that slyness floating in it.

“Whatcha thinking about?” Her dad asked as they resumed their drive home.

Joanie had partially shaken the smiling boy from the gas station out of her mind, and was now pondering more pressing matters.

She was in luck. With her mom in one of her disinterested moods, suffering from an extended migraine, it was her dad’s call on whether she’d be allowed to go the party. After his speech about trying to get along with teammates, there was no way he could say no.
After she’d told him about practice, about a chance for a connection with these older girls, Joanie’s dad took a long, grumbly breath and gripped his gloved hands a little firmer on the steering wheel. He’d brought out the winter gear, Joanie observed, wearing his old grey rag of a scarf and even his Hocking Hills hat. In the summer, when he spent a lot of time in the hot sun, you could believe that the two of them were father and daughter. Now, with the tan gone from his face and his arms, strangers gave them looks. *Foster parent? Adopted? You know this man, right, honey?*

The radio vaguely droned from the speakers, not loud enough for either of them to hear. Joanie almost turned the dial up to listen to the woman’s voice, resigned to let Dad think about it for a day or two, when he finally spoke.

“Will the parents be home?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Can you find out?”

“I mean…not really, Dad.”

“*Why not?”*

“Because it’s just not that easy. I can’t ask that.”

They turned off of Main Street, taking the scenic route home. Joanie and Jimmy both preferred the pot-holed country road that passed the abandoned golf course to the couple of shopping plazas and busy traffic light.

“What about booze? There gonna be any of that there?”

Joanie scowled and rolled down the window a crack. “I have no idea. But if there is I won’t drink any.”
Her dad’s head instinctually shook just a little, like a slight breeze had passed by a bobblehead doll. He stared pensively out at the road. “You know, you’re being kind of elusive all of a sudden,” he said.

“I can’t just sit Olivia down and play twenty questions with her!” She was breathing a little heavier now. But getting angry wouldn’t help her case, she knew. Hit the reset button, start the level over. “If the party’s too crazy I’ll call you and I’ll come home.”

He said nothing.

“Deal?” Joanie asked, and held out her hand, knuckles facing the emergency brake that lay between them. The sooner they had some sort of accord, a handshake or a promise, the better.

Her dad looked down at her hand, chuckled, and grudgingly shook it. “This means nothing if your mom’s not cool with it.”

At home, Joanie was surprised. She found her mom tending to a bubbling pot of noodles in the kitchen. She was leaning her face over the steam, absorbing some of the warm vapor.

“Smells good, Mom.” She couldn’t smell anything. It was just noodles.

She looked up and smiled. “Really?”

“Well, I can tell it’s gonna be good.”

She laughed and stirred. “Wanna set out five plates for me?”

Joanie was already opening the cupboard but stopped. “Five?”
“Dave, Jimmy’s friend, is over. They’re in the basement.”

Joanie looked from her mom to the plates to the basement door, cracked open, cavernous yellow light seeping out. She could hear them murmuring and playing ping-pong. She set the table quickly and descended the creaky steps. Her excuse, if need be, could be grabbing a clean towel to shower.

Their unfinished basement had white brick walls that sometimes leaked trickles of grey water. It was ten degrees colder down here. In the middle of the large room was her grandpa’s old ping-pong table, cracked on one side, where Joanie had smacked the wood with her paddle in fury. If the ball landed on the crack, the custom was to call it a redo.

There were the two of them, now silent, hitting the ball lackadaisically back and forth. The way the ball drifted from one side to the other told Joanie they weren’t playing a real game. They were up to something else, discussing a matter that had been cut off the moment she’d open the basement door.

Joanie slowly moseyed over to a basket of clean towels next to the couch that Roland, their cat, always slept on. “Can I get winner?” she asked.

The two of them looked at each other.

“What?” she said. Curiosity swept upon her like goosebumps.

Jimmy slowly placed his paddle down on top of the table, the ball wedged beneath it. Dave seemed to understand something.

They told her a story.
A dehumidifier hissed on. Joanie noticed a tiny spider scurrying past her feet. She listened to the two of them talk, Jimmy more animated than Dave, who wore a haggard expression, his brown hair greasy and disheveled.

A wave of questions came rolling into her mind. Who was this guy Josh? Were they stealing money, and if so, how much? A more important question—why did her brother and his friend care so much about all this? She decided to voice a different one.

“So…Mr. Branch is gay?”

“It would appear so,” Dave said. “Wouldn’t you agree, Jimmy?”

“Yeah,” he said, leaning both of his hands on the table. “I mean, why else would the two of them hug like that?”

“I wouldn’t have expected,” Dave said faintly.

Joanie imagined what a guy like Anthony Bellflower would say if he knew his math teacher was gay, what names he would snicker at lunch. He’d probably get a good laugh out of it for a week and that’d be it. She supposed even her dad, the devout Catholic that he was, wouldn’t have many good things to say about it, in his nice sort of way of course. Her mom wouldn’t care at all.

She herself—well she didn’t really know what to think. She hadn’t much experience with the whole matter. That sort of thing was mostly just a word you used. “This homework is so gay,” she remembered saying many times.

The two of them seemed to be digesting the same sort of thoughts, Joanie observed. They were both staring at nothing in particular. I wonder how Jimmy would
react seeing two guys kissing each other, she wondered. She had to laugh to herself, picturing her brother squirming, pretending not to notice.

“Well,” Jimmy said, “it has to be decently shady business, whatever they’re up to. To leave school and go to Millstone Tavern.”

“There’s something else,” Dave said, blurting his words out. He seemed to have made up his mind about something and was going forward with it. He was picking at his nails. “I think he saw me.”


Dave nodded. Shadows had fallen on his face and they made him look a little older. Outside now, it was completely dark. “I’d been holding the dumpster up an inch to see but it was getting heavy and I wavered with it a bit, you know? And when they were hugging, Branch looked straight into the dumpster and his facial expression changed. We made eye contact.”

Joanie felt the air change just a little in the basement, like a ghost story had just been told.

Dave went on. “I’d been thinking about it and now I’m almost sure of it. He saw me in there and when he did, it’s like it wasn’t the same man anymore. His eyes changed. He said ‘let’s get it out of here’ to the Josh guy in his funny, caring voice, but I’m telling you…something about his expression…he can turn dark real quick.”

“But you can’t be sure of that,” Jimmy said. “And besides, he wouldn’t a’ been able to tell it was you.”

“I mean, hopefully he didn’t know it was me. But how can you tell?”
No one seemed to have an answer to the question. Someone’s feet pattered above them. The dehumidifier clicked off, the ensuing silence harsh. Jimmy walked over and turned the knob higher up so it would resume its soothing hush.

“Do you think I should be worried?” Dave asked.

“We could go to the cops,” Joanie said.

Her words didn’t seem to help Dave. “Cops?” It came out as a squeal.

“Well I didn’t mean because of your safety.” She was trying to sound confident. “I mean it’s Mr. Branch we’re talking about. You guys both love him, don’t you?”

“But we only know him in the classroom,” Dave said. “That’s just a sliver of his life.”

Joanie and Dave’s gaze both slowly rotated towards Jimmy, who’d been silent for awhile now. He seemed to be mentally writing things down. They looked at him until he finally noticed and offered his thoughts.

“I think we need to do more scout work before we can decide anything.”

“Ourselves?” Dave asked.

“I don’t think we can go to the cops on what we have,” Jimmy said.

“Sure we could.”

Joanie nodded in agreement with Dave. If nothing else, they’d at least make a note of it in their “Suspicious Activity” files or whatever. But, Joanie thought, did they want to notify the police? What had Mr. Branch ever done to them? He was a
lazy teacher, sure, but was that enough to rat him out? Suddenly, Joanie wished she’d been there spying on them today, so she could better decide for herself.

“Why are you so interested in this?” Dave asked.

It seemed to be the question Jimmy was hoping wouldn’t get asked, landing hard. He was stalling, taking a deep breath, glancing up at the tiled ceiling, but not to find an answer, Joanie knew. He was just having a hard time putting it into words.

From her perspective, it all made perfect sense. Jimmy opened doors like just maybe they’d lead to some other world. He cried when didn’t get his letter of acceptance to Hogwarts, and not just on his eleventh birthday. Yes, he strolled around the woods because it made him feel peaceful, but that wasn’t the main reason he did it. He was looking for a way in. Some crevice in a big oak tree, or a cave at the top of the hill. In the summer, the two of them couldn’t run through the sprinkler without it functioning as a portal to a magical realm. And he’d never grown out of that stage. Even as a sophomore he’d quit the basketball team because he couldn’t swallow the banality of ordinary life. He needed more time to live in the pages of his books, to walk in the woods.

And now, he’d found a tiny morsel of something different. There weren’t any elves, or epic battles to be fought, but it was an adventure.

*And it’s one I won’t go on, Joanie thought. And to the look of it, neither will Dave.* She had tennis playoffs, studies, and Olivia’s party to worry about. Which of her friends was she going to bring?
The door from upstairs creaked open, popping the strange bubble they were all in. “Dinner!” Dad yelled.

Joanie lowered the notch on the dehumidifier and it spuddled out. Jimmy pulled the hanging cord from the ceiling and the room went dark. The three of them ascended the stairs in silence.
Chapter VI

The house was new, with fragile things inside it. The plasma TV was so thin Joanie could have crushed it in two with her knee, the little bits fraying everywhere. There were shiny hardwood floors and unblemished carpets, though a lot of the kids had kept their shoes on so who knew how long the carpets would look so royal?

Come to think of it, Joanie realized, she was the only one at the party who had taken her shoes off. It’s what she always did. When you came over a friend’s house you took off your shoes. Or so she thought.

Luckily, no one seemed to notice yet. She’d had her dad drop her off a few houses before Olivia’s, not wanting to cause a scene, her dad shouting out the car window: “don’t put your drink down! Or if you do, just get a new one!”

Earlier in the day, she’d been pacing her room, nervous because the three friends she’d asked to go with her had all rejected the offer. Both Megan and Savannah’s parents wouldn’t let them go to a party without a guarantee of adult supervision, and Brittany was heading down to nearby Athens to visit family.

She’d looked at the other numbers written down, how she felt less and less comfortable with each ensuing name on the list. Eventually, she decided she could go it alone. Chaperoning a friend would just prohibit her from bonding with Olivia and the other girls on the team.

“Savannah’s just gonna meet me there,” she’d told her parents.

Now Joanie was strolling the house, the only one in socks, looking for a familiar face. A couple of guys in tight thermals gave her a do you belong here? look,
but otherwise, no one really seemed to notice her. Everywhere she walked the Black Eyed Peas and Eminem followed loudly. All of these juniors and seniors just shouted over the noise, holding either a plastic blue cup or a beer can. She wondered where she might find one of those blue cups.

Joanie navigated through three rooms before she finally found someone she knew in the kitchen. Sami, a sophomore! She was mixing a drink on a counter. They’d had a few classes together, hadn’t really talked to each other much in them, but that didn’t matter now. Joanie waded towards her.

“Sami,” Joanie said, smiling.

“Oh hey girl,” she said, pulling Joanie into a clumsy hug. “What are you doing here?”

“We’re tennis partners. Me and Olivia.”

“Right on,” she said.

It was cool to see Sami dressed up, Joanie thought. She was wearing jeans, a fancy shirt with a colorful skull on the chest, and a purple sweater. Normally she scrubbed around at school. Joanie didn’t mind, but she’d heard other girls make fun of her for it.

Sami was pouring punch from the ladle into her cup. Joanie must have been staring, transfixed by the green liquid because now Sami was giving her a mischievous smile.

“Have you ever gotten silly?” She asked.

Before Joanie could respond, a cup was being transported into her hand.
“If I was a betting girl, I’d say no.”

Joanie gave it a whiff. It smelled sugary. Sami laughed, took a drink. “I’m glad you came out,” she said, and lightly punched her cup with Joanie’s. A couple of drops bell-curved onto both of their clothes.

Two guys bumped into Joanie, trying to make drinks for themselves. As she eyed them cautiously she realized they were the same ones she’d seen earlier, wearing the tight thermal tops that gripped their muscles.

“What do you like it?”

It took a second for Joanie to realize the question was being directed at her. She was frazzled. There was a mysterious beverage in her hand, loud music was blaring relentlessly, and there were strangers everywhere. She could begin to feel sweat settling in under her clothes.

“I brought most of the supplies,” the guy continued. This one had tamed acne dotting his face. He reached over and opened the freezer door, pulling out a clear long bottle.

“It’s not bad,” Joanie said.

“Liar,” Sami butt in, still smiling. Everyone was smiling in their own strange way. “She hasn’t had one sip.”

Her one ally had ratted her out. Sami and the two boys watched her now in silence, no doubt waiting for Joanie to lift the cup to her mouth and drink.

At first, it tasted strangely of her childhood, all the Hawaiian Punch she and Jimmy used to drink on summer picnics. Then the foulness came. Joanie thought of
some old witch, one who’d never mastered the trick of concealing the poison in the
potions she mixed.

But that wasn’t the point, she remembered. That’s what everybody wanted—the
poison.

“Not so bad, right?” Sami shouted at her.

Joanie felt herself purse her lips and shrug. She took another sip, this one more
tolerable than the last.

Somehow the four of them had huddled closer into each other, a team meeting.

“Any chance we can get on that beer pong table?” Sami asked the two boys. “It’d
be her first time,” she added, shrugging at Joanie.

The one who’d grabbed the bottle shook his head unbelievably and laughed.

“You serious?”

“Yeah,” Joanie said flatly. What was the big deal? She was a sophomore,
after all. Though maybe that wasn’t something to be brought up.

“Well, then we gotta,” he said, and took another long sip from his cup. “I’ll
show you the ropes. Me and you versus those two.”

His name was Gus, Joanie found out as they waited for the table to open up.
He told her he played tight end for Lancaster, a town over from them. He went on for
awhile about how he was starting to get more playing time when he must have realized
he’d been talking too much. He stopped midsentence like he’d almost choked on
something.

“What about you? What’s your story?” He asked.
Joanie had been looking around the kitchen and into the big family room; kids on the couches, the floor, the wooden fireplace, and a few dancing furiously into each other. Still no sign of Olivia. She’d seen a couple of her other varsity teammates, but if they recognized her, they didn’t show it. Whatever, Joanie thought. If they didn’t want to talk to her, so be it. Let the party grow like a bonfire, for all she cared. She looked into her cup. Most of the green liquid was gone.

They were up to play. Two pyramids of blue plastic cups edged both sides of the long wooden kitchen table. Gus explained the rules, huddling in closer to her, his breath hinting of cigarette smoke. “All you gotta do is shoot into the cups, for the most part. Oh, and if they make cups, we drink em. The rest… you’ll figure out. Let me show you the form,” he grabbed her arm.

Joanie rebuffed him, tensing up, backing away slightly. “I got it I think,” she said, and flicked her right hand like she was shooting a miniature free throw.

“All right,” Gus shouted. “Fucking love it.”

This would be easy, she thought. Just let me play this all night until dad picks me up.

Sami and the other guy started first, sinking both balls, which meant Joanie and Gus drank. This stuff tasted like contaminated well water, and looked like it too. Luckily, it was just one gulp. Then Gus bounce-passed his shot in and apparently that meant they got an extra cup moved away. Sami’s partner called him a bitch from across the table. Joanie didn’t like him. When it was her turn, she let the ball fly
confidently out of her hand. It soared, well past the table, plopped onto somebody’s head and bounced down the hall.

Sami was hunched over, laughing. Her partner rolled his eyes and went searching for the ball.

“Gotta get the lead out, right?” Gus asked.

“Uh, sure,” Joanie said.

The party vibrated all around them. Gus must have felt nervous after getting his shooting instruction rejected because he stood there silently. Joanie was glad. She wanted everyone to clear out, leave her here with just these cups so she could practice her shot in silence. Maybe a little Fleetwood Mac playing wistfully in the background.

She was too young for all this. Or too old. Either way, it wasn’t her scene.

The beer in the cups in front of her quivered as if a small earthquake was passing through the house. Suddenly, words drifted by that caught Joanie’s attention, coming from two guys both in sleek black glasses, waiting their turn to play at the side of the table.

“Dude, Branch is the chillest teacher at Logan.”

“You know he lives close by, don’t you?”

“Let’s invite him over. I’m sure he’d be down.”

They both laughed.

Joanie felt herself stepping closer towards them. Words flowed out of her mouth without any hesitation. “Do you know which house is his?”

“Uh, the tinier one, with the basketball hoop, I think. Just a few houses down.”
Mr. Branch lived in a development like this? It didn’t seem to fit. Yet he also didn’t seem the type who’d been living in Logan for years. She wanted to ask them about it more but Sami’s partner had found the ball and Gus was calling her over. “Alright let’s get our head in the game, huh?”

Joanie missed every shot. Meanwhile, the other three were experts. Every time Sami’s team scored, they hugged. How could she be so good? Weren’t they the same age? Gus seemed to want to celebrate in a similar fashion when he made his shots, but Joanie made sure to angle her body away from him. Instead, she offered him a couple of half-hearted high fives.

She grew quickly tired of the gulps of beer. While before she felt fuzzy but controlled, now her body was swaying involuntarily. She pretended to groove along with the music.

What was she doing here? She needed to use the bathroom, but not here, where there’d surely be specks of vomit on the toilet seat, and shouts of “hurry up!” from outside the door. The clock on the microwave read 10:15.

A drizzle of wetness splashed her forearm. Across the table, Sami and her partner were engaged in a celebratory kiss. Joanie looked down to see a ball floating in their last cup. They’d lost.

“Man, you’re pretty bad,” Gus said.

“Yeah, you too,” Joanie responded. There had to be someone else she knew here, she thought, fighting her way out of the kitchen. She heard Gus ask her where she was off to so quickly but she didn’t turn around.
The party had escalated since she’d last wandered the house. Some had already passed out on couches, but a lot more were dancing, kissing, shouting. Joanie didn’t dare try the bedrooms, so she finally resigned to the porch.

When she slid open the glass door she saw a small fire pit flickering to the left of her. Kids covered in shadows were drinking all around it. One of them was Olivia. She wore a baggy sweatshirt, the sleeves stretching well past her hands. A nearly empty bottle was nestled between her legs and the plastic seat. She was giggling tiredly and nuzzling her face into some guy’s shoulder.

Joanie went to slide the door shut but something was resisting her pull. She turned around. Gus. He’d returned, joining her outside. “I got it,” he said.

Great, thanks, Joanie thought.

“Alyssa? That you?” Somebody asked from the dark. It had sounded like Olivia.

Joanie slowly turned her head from the Kumbaya session and surveyed the row of backyards. Wind rustled the manicured lawns. A few thin, bare trees swayed inside neatly organized mulch circles. She decided she didn’t care about bonding with Olivia anymore, didn’t care about making friends. The whole thing was impossible, especially when her body and mind felt this foggy. *No one will remember I was even here,* she thought, and walked away, glad to distance herself from the clamor of the party, even if it meant Gus following her like a hungry Golden Retriever.

It didn’t take long for her to realize she didn’t have any shoes on. Her socks were soaked after a couple of backyards.
“You wanna go get em?” Gus asked, noticing too, surprisingly observant.

“Nah,” Joanie said, resigned to never return to Olivia’s. What bothered her more than the wet, cold feet was the strange whirlpool that seemed to be brewing inside her stomach.

She wanted to go crouch behind a bush on the side of a house and pee. But what would Gus think? Who cared what he thought. Still, Joanie held it. She also needed to throw up. Girls talked about really reaching your arm down your throat as a surefire method to vomit, but Joanie shuddered at the thought. Instead, she veered left and trudged dizzily towards the street.

Gus was breathing heavily but slowly, almost like he was asleep with a heavy cold. “Where you taking me, Joanie?”

It still wasn’t raining, but everything seemed to be wet—fresh droplets on dark cold cars, puddles gathering by sewers. It didn’t take long for them to find it—the smallest house on the street. Still well put-together and new, but more like a cottage compared to its neighbors, with a portable basketball hoop watching over the driveway. Zero light shined from any of the windows.

The party had been a mistake. It’d be an hour before dad picked her up. Until then, she might as well do a little investigative work for Jimmy.

Gus’s sweaty, callused hand touched Joanie’s. She quickly slid hers into her coat pocket. God, she had to pee.

Mr. Branch’s backyard was well put together, which surprised her, and it spread out towards more woods that would probably soon get chopped down. There
was a small deck with a swing that didn’t creak at all in the wind. They crossed the patio and escalated the fresh wooden steps.

“Nice little porch,” Gus said.

Joanie edged herself quietly into the cushion of the swing. Water quickly seeped through her jeans, but she didn’t care. It was comfortable. The longer she sat, the more she wanted to lie down. Her head was gathering mass by the second. She felt slow, useless. The whole night had been a waste. The only way she could make anything productive out of it now was to help her brother out. For some reason, she felt now like she’d betrayed him. This would ease her guilt, telling him she did a little snooping around the suspect’s house.

Gus was walking around a little, pretending to inspect the flowerpots on the ledge, testing the woodwork. He made his way around the deck until he reached the swing and plopped down next to Joanie. “I’m glad we got outta there,” he said.

Joanie said nothing, trying to observe her surroundings like a good detective. No one seemed to be home. Maybe a backdoor was open. If Mr. Branch was really up to something, she’d surely find a clue inside. On the other hand, why not just remain still, letting the toxins of the party seep out of her and stream away into the misty night?

But she couldn’t do that, not with Gus next to her, slipping his arm behind her back like a coy boa-constrictor.

Joanie felt like a superhero who’d been debilitated by some harmful, weakening vapor. In her mind she was bolting off the swing, jumping over the
banister of the porch and heading back to the front yard where the streetlights could guarantee her safety. But she was slow, clumsy, sick. Gus was closing in, reeking of Axe Body Spray and alcohol, a smell she was trying to forget. *Throw up on him!* Joanie thought, but to no avail. The storm in her stomach just wouldn’t break.

Joanie felt his lips envelope her mouth for just a second before she was pushing him away, scrambling off the swing. She caught her foot on one of the wooden beams and nearly toppled over but caught herself.

“Dude, what is your fucking deal?” He stammered. He was pushing the sleeves of his thermal up to reveal veiny, bulging forearms. As he propped himself off the swing, Joanie looked into his eyes for the first time. They were glossed over, like 42 percent of Gus was somewhere else entirely.

“Let’s head back to the party, how about?” Joanie asked.

“The party sucks. Why don’t you just wanna chill here?”

What happened next moved quickly. Gus closed the gap between them, again trying to wrap an arm around her. Joanie had noted the small flowerpot resting on the ledge, the one she thought she could palm, and when she felt that same hard, burly grasp upon her she clenched the cold clay of the pot and swung it around like a haymaker right into his face. Something crunched. A brown shard had wedged itself into his skin. Right on cue, blood streamed from the gash she’d made like a heavy rain drop on a window. And, out of the corner of her eye, a light turned on inside the house.
The creased shock in Gus’s face made him look five years younger, five years more innocent. He backed away from her, touching his cheekbone delicately, pressing his palm where the blood started. It seemed a small patch of skin had been peeled off.

Joanie was about to apologize, tell him she’d overreacted, when she froze.

It was a sight she wished Jimmy could have seen. Clad in a flannel fuzzy robe, sandy hair disheveled and greasy, glasses teeterly resting on the bridge of his nose, Mr. Branch held a gun in his hand like it was a large piece of firewood. It was a sleek, brown rifle with a black tube fastened onto the end of it. He was unlocking the door, removing the metal rod that promised extra security.

“You’re a fucking bitch,” Gus was saying, his shock beginning to be replaced by anger, unaware that a third member had shown up to the gathering. When Branch slid open the glass door, Gus shifted his head, saw what was coming out onto the porch, and did what Joanie had imagined doing minutes before—he hopped over the handrail, landed clumsily onto the grass, and train wrecked his way out of sight, grunting the whole time. He’d left a dotted trail of red on the wood.

Joanie remained still, the light from the kitchen flooding onto her. Mr. Branch stood in the doorway. He made no effort of lifting the gun so as to appear willing to shoot.

“Joanie Atwater,” he said, half question, half statement. “What in God’s name are you doing on my porch?”

She felt too vulnerable to speak, too bamboozled.
“And you broke my pot. Thanks a lot,” he said. “And where the hell’s your shoes?”

Joanie looked down at her grayish, dirty, seeping socks, and suddenly she felt hot, thick, paste barreling up her throat. She threw up to the sound of Mr. Branch’s shocked, why me? groans. Her insides now lay on the wood like road kill. She stayed hunched over afterwards, letting her body calm down, but then her bladder spoke up. not yet! It said, unless you want to piss your pants too.

“Come inside,” Mr. Branch finally said. “If you’re done, you know…throwing up.”

Inside, with lots of woodwork, his home did resemble a cabin. As she used his bathroom and then his phone, calling home, telling Dad to please calm down, she’d explain when he picked her up, some minuscule part of her took notes on anything out of the ordinary in the house. Mr. Branch appeared to be an organized, neat man, which made no sense. She couldn’t understand how the place was so orderly when at school he behaved in the exact opposite manner. But then she thought: maybe he’d been forced to clean, because of something that had gone on here.

And of course, there was also the gun. While she waited by the living room window for Dad’s headlight beams to pierce the darkness, she ate some crackers Mr. Branch had given her. He sat on the couch, staring down at the carpet, sleepily attempting to process what had just occurred.

“What’s the black thing? On your rifle?” Joanie asked.
He didn’t answer for a while, massaging his overgrown eyebrows so that hairs jutted in all sorts of directions. Finally, he lifted his head and looked at her. “It’s a suppressor. For hunting.”

“You hunt?” Joanie asked.

“I do indeed. You surprised?”

Joanie thought about it. “A little.”

“Who was the guy who you wacked over the head with my pot?” He asked.

She replayed the combat in her mind. She hadn’t explicitly told Gus to stop, though she doubted that he would have listened. Nonetheless, a little tinge of guilt, mixed with the rest of the alcohol still in her stomach, began to churn again.

“Some guy. His name was Gus.”

“Well…that explains everything then,” Mr. Branch said, blowing air out his nostrils.

Thankfully, her teacher didn’t inquire more. He actually was a pretty chill guy, Joanie concluded.

She hoped Jimmy would come along for the ride. She could use his chuckles amidst her dad’s yells. She’d gotten in trouble a few times way back in elementary school, once for turning off the lights in the cafeteria during lunch, and another time because a girl had stolen something from her (candy? a prize she’d won?) and she’d tackled her in the middle of the coatroom in attempt to get it back. Her dad had yelled for awhile, assigned her extra chores, and sentenced her to bed an hour earlier than
Jimmy for a month. What would he do with her now? What *could* he do? And furthermore, could she conceal most of the story from him?

An old clock ticked in the room over, a reminder of the order of things.

“Maybe we’re both dreaming,” Mr. Branch said, just as Joanie saw her dad’s truck turn the corner onto the dark, glossy street.

“I hope so,” she said.

“But then again,” he was perked up a bit now, “I’d be a teacher dreaming about a student, and that can’t be good…though I’m sure it happens. And why the hell would I be in *your* dream?”

“A good point,” Joanie agreed.