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BEACON LIGHT AND OTHER STORIES

by

Joseph Holt

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School  
and the Department of English  
at The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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May 2017

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ABSTRACT

BEACON LIGHT AND OTHER STORIES

by Joseph Holt

May 2017

The following stories, composed between fall 2013 and spring 2016, concern matters of devotion, obsession, trauma, and recovery. They progress from objective points-of-view to omniscience, along the way adopting larger narrative time frames and casts of characters.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Steven Barthelme has been consistently generous and encouraging during my enrollment in the Center for Writers. Any improvements I've made as a writer and teacher are due largely to his leadership. Dr. Katherine Cochran, Dr. Charles Sumner and Anne Sanow were helpful and supportive throughout my coursework, examinations and dissertation period. Andrew Malan Milward and Rebecca Morgan Frank both inspired and challenged me as a developing writer and editor. Lastly, my peers in the Center for Writers helped shape my work with their thoughtful criticism.

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## INTRODUCTION

No one ever told me about M.F.A. programs. Back in 2005, when I was first applying for graduate studies in English, I didn't even know they existed. It seems like a major oversight, seeing how the Internet was definitely a thing then, and that at some point I must have browsed the how-to writing guides at Barnes & Noble or Borders. But however it happened, I remained completely ignorant that most young writers today hone their craft around the seminar table.

Back then I was in my mid-twenties. I had studied literature as an undergraduate and done a little journalism. Certainly I wanted to write creatively, but I didn't know how to get started. So when I entered the M.A. program at the University of North Dakota in fall 2005, I undertook a course of study in Modernist literature, textual theory, and scholarly editing. And while I enjoyed the work—it allowed me to assess texts from both the author's and editor's perspectives—it failed to scratch my creative itch.

After I graduated I went out into the world and wrote on my own, considering myself an institutional outsider since I hadn't gone the M.F.A route. Never mind that I would have applied to M.F.A. programs if I'd only known earlier that was an option. But without the guidance of a good teacher, I made the same mistakes over and over. My stories were clumsy, maudlin, and far too serious. I was trying to be clever rather than sincere. My depth of vision seemed limited to what I'd read, which admittedly wasn't very diverse. And I was stubborn, spending countless hours rewriting flat passages and trying to salvage hopeless narratives. Any stories I finished or improvements I made were the result of only dumb perseverance. In regards to my artistic development, I probably could have saved myself a few years of bad writing if only I'd asked for help sooner.

In studying editorial theory at the University of North Dakota, I learned that contrary to the romantic beliefs of authorship, writing is in fact a communal endeavor. That is, texts are actualized not by solitary authors, but also agents, editors, publishers, and publicists. Add to that list, readers. But in my wilderness years of writing alone, I avoided the feedback that might help improve my work. Slowly I realized this—the error of my ways—which led to me entering the Center for Writers in the fall of 2013.

I've improved as a storyteller in my four years in the Center for Writers. Saying so is no act of arrogance; I simply had to improve, given all the hours spent fumbling at my desk. And now, in preparing my creative dissertation, I'm able to reflect on how my peers and workshop leaders helped me better understand what makes a compelling narrative. (The only surefire strategy: don't be boring.) The six stories I include here are as much a product of my peers' and teachers' insights as they are a result of my own efforts. I trust they illustrate my development as a young writer, one who is still learning to accept criticism, broaden his technique and attempt new narrative styles and structures.

The first two stories, "Worst at Night" and "Fricassee," are similar in that they each consist, essentially, of single extended scenes. In "Worst at Night," a man must protect his daughter while disposing of an intruder he knocked unconscious. In "Fricassee," a man attempts to prepare a special anniversary dinner for his wife. The time frame for each story is similar: no longer than a single day. And the cast of characters hardly differs: "Worst at Night" consists of four main characters and a couple dogs, while "Fricassee" consists of four main characters and a cat. The protagonist of each story encounters a single problem meant to be resolved by the final page.



Both “Worst at Night” and “Fricassee” attempt to tell a story from Point A to Point B, Point C to Point D, and so on. They contain almost no exposition, instead following the basic dramatic formula of conflict, complication, resolution. (Admittedly, eliding exposition is a fault of mine as a writer, as though I fear it will stall a story’s momentum when skipping over it can in fact obscure a character’s attitudes and motivation.) “Worst at Night” has a first-person narrator, while “Fricassee” takes on a third-person limited (nearly objective) point of view. I wrote both these stories in fall 2013, my first semester in the Center for Writers. In hindsight, I believe they reflect a young writer deathly afraid of making mistakes.

“Beacon Light” is more ambitious in regards to narrative scope. In it, a teenage girl is abducted into the woods and later attempts to recover her sense of self. This story covers about four years, from the protagonist’s freshman year of high school to her senior year. It also deals with more severe subject matter—rebellion, oppression, trauma and despair. When I first drafted “Beacon Light” in fall 2014, I considered it more of a character exercise than an attempt at story. Its protagonist, Rachel Dahl, appears in the novel manuscript I’m preparing, and “Beacon Light,” while not part of that manuscript, was my attempt to flesh out her backstory.

I’ve put “Beacon Light” through perhaps fifteen, twenty drafts—I don’t know—and I’m still not sure it’s found its best form. At first, it progressed fluidly, uninterrupted by section breaks. Later I separated the story into thirds: before, during and after Rachel’s abduction. And after that I divided it further, into the 25 sections it includes now. (Some of those sections are named, like the story itself, after songs by the alt-rock band Ween.) Even though the structure is complex, the narrative point of view is regular old third-

person limited. The story strictly follows Rachel, and the narration hardly delves into her psychology. In most cases, the images and events are reported objectively. In revising this story, I've struggled to be concise while still providing plausible, lifelike details. As Horace writes in his *Ars Poetica*, "I strive to be brief and become obscure."

I wrote the next story, "Make It Yours," a full year after first drafting "Beacon Light" and two years after "Worst at Night" and "Fricassee." It demonstrates, I believe, my increasing confidence with points-of-view beyond first-person and third-person limited. In "Make It Yours," two concrete workers appropriate another man's story in an attempt to understand his actions and make sense of his death. Structurally, this story is complicated. It's an extended frame narrative with a metafictional turn in the final couple pages. My approach was informed by Antonya Nelson's "Chapter Two," in which a frame narrative is teased out over multiple scenes as opposed to one big breath of reported dialogue like the frame narrative in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

"Make It Yours" adopts an omniscient narrator. When the storyteller—in this case me, or a persona of me—reveals himself as a type of puppetmaster in the final couple pages, the narration style becomes what John Gardner calls the authorial-objective, in which "the writer speaks as, in effect, God" (157). That is, in the world of the story, the author/narrator is all-knowing and has conscious control of his creations. Truthfully, I was just making up the structure for this story during the act of composition, but upon reflection I see that I was striving for a more complex effect than I could have achieved with the limited point of view I'd employed in my previous stories.

"Make It Yours" also illustrates the influence of technical writing on my creative work. By my count, I've taught about 40 sections of technical writing over the last ten

years. In the classroom, we define technical writing as taking a complex subject and simplifying it for non-experts. In “Make It Yours” I wrote technical definitions (“Concrete goes bad through a process called delamination, in which water intrudes into the road bed and rusts out the steel rebar”) and described technical processes (maintaining roadways and repairing an electric typewriter). These details might not advance the human conflict of the story, but I believe they deepen the story’s verisimilitude and thus engender trust from the reader. For “Make It Yours” I drew heavily on my experiences working for the South Dakota Department of Transportation.

Lastly in regards to “Make It Yours,” I’m aware that the story might require extra effort from the reader since it contains summarized and reported dialogue yet proceeds without quotation marks. With this approach I was attempting to remove the artifice of direct quotation (or verbatim dialogue), since the final narrative intrusion negates any pretense of truth (or accuracy in dialogue) in the story that preceded. Knowing this stylistic approach might be confusing, however, I tried especially hard to be clear and brief in the sentence-level expression. I believe clarity in writing is an ethical issue.

With this statement, I’m alluding to the implicit trust agreement between reader and writer. Both reading and writing require a great deal of effort. Especially today in the smartphone age, readers have plenty of other reading and viewing options. So if an intelligent, attentive reader is so kind as to choose my story, I feel obligated to make their experience worthwhile. In one way, I don’t want a reader to grow frustrated and quit reading on page three. But in another way, I want readers to know that I respect and appreciate their attention. Good writing might contain purposeful ambiguity, but never

unintended obscurity. My opinion on this matter comes from Joseph M. Williams' *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. In a chapter titled "The Ethics of Style," he writes:

Most of us [readers] do work hard to understand—at least until we decide that a writer has failed to work equally hard to help us reach that understanding, or, worse, has deliberately made our reading more difficult than it has to be. Once we decide that a writer was careless or thoughtless or lazy—well, our days are too few to spend them on those indifferent to our needs. (178)

Williams later argues that "socially responsible writers" should neither dumb down nor gussy up their ideas, but rather present them in a manner appropriate to their ideological content (179). As a teacher of technical writing, I've told my students that the style readers find most appealing is conversational in tone, simple and accessible. That means identifiable sentence subjects, active verbs, sentences of breathing length. "Make It Yours" might be challenging because of its complex narrative frame and specialized subject matter, but I hope to have eased that challenge with lucid, articulate narration. In this story more than any other, I felt obliged to express my ideas with a minimum of clutter and digression.

The final two stories of my dissertation, "Sad Elizabeth" and "No Thanks," are excerpts from my novel manuscript *Shake This Noose*, in which two radio deejays try locating a young woman they witness attempting to hang herself. Both these excerpts come near the beginning of the manuscript. In "Sad Elizabeth," the two deejays try recovering purpose in their lives after being fired. And in "No Thanks," the young woman, a long-distance runner and former kidnapping victim (Rachel Dahl from the

story “Beacon Light”), alternates between bliss and despair during her junior and senior years of college.

I believe these excerpts cover time more fluidly than I’d managed in my earlier writings. Perhaps previously I’d been so indoctrinated with the “Show, don’t tell” dictum that I’d made it my style to dramatize everything. That’s how a story like “Worst at Night,” which covers only a couple hours of story time, could last fourteen pages. It’s like I tried showing everything in its minutest detail. But in “Sad Elizabeth” and “No Thanks,” I’ve attempted to summarize plot events and thus advance the narrative more swiftly. What might previously have been two or three pages now becomes a paragraph or two—almost like an anecdote (for instance, a brief scene in which the deejay Paul Berlin breaks his ankle playing basketball).

When I first applied to the Center for Writers in 2013, I expressed my desire to write the manuscript that has become *Shake This Noose*. In my statement of purpose I cited Frederick Barthelme’s *Second Marriage* and Mary Robison’s *Subtraction* as touchstone novels, instructive in how they focus on external narrative and steer clear of histrionics. And now, four years later, these two novels continue to inspire and instruct my approach to long-form narrative. Near the beginning of *Subtraction*, Robison defines her artistic credo in a scene where the narrator, a poet and Harvard professor named Paige, eavesdrops on some foreign scholars beside a hotel pool. The scholars discuss film, the origin of ideas, and the creation of art: “‘Selection, no?’ someone said. ‘What it means to be an artist’” (16). And in *Second Marriage*, Barthelme alludes to his artistic vision when the narrator’s wife asks whether they should invite the neighbors over to visit. At first the narrator, Henry, resists. Then he says:

“But go ahead, I’m ready for anything.” I thought that was funny and romantic, something from a new movie full of wood-sided station wagons and blue-green pools—the kind of movie they started making a few years ago, in which ordinary life is at once ridiculed and shown to be strange and wonderful. (25)

As a reader and developing writer, I took toward this proclamation: “Go ahead, I’m ready for anything.” That attitude of daring can engender drama, since characters are willing to take risks and embrace change. And Henry’s observation about recent movies, those that portray modern life as both bewildering and miraculous, seems to encourage a productively optimistic worldview, one of attentiveness and gratitude, which lately I’ve been attempting more and more to incorporate in my own fiction.

I believe that in my four years in the Center for Writers I’ve become a more agile narrative artist. As the stories I’ve wanted to tell have grown more complex, so have the techniques I’ve attempted to employ. The most useful technique is probably that of the omniscient narrator, which occurs in “Make It Yours,” “Sad Elizabeth” and “No Thanks.” An omniscient narrator exercises control over the pacing, movement and psychic distance of a story. It also requires selection, which Mary Robison suggests in *Subtraction* is the hallmark of an artist. Richard Russo, while pointing out that omniscience literally means “all-knowing,” states that this narrative approach “favors writers who know things and are confident about what they know and generous enough to want to share their knowledge” (15).

Surely I think I know more than I actually do. But without a doubt, I’m older (and maybe slightly wiser) now than I was those many years ago when I first applied to

graduate school. I was probably lucky to be ignorant about writing programs back then. I wasn't prepared. I needed to read more, learn more about life, and get the bad writing out of my system first. Add to that, I'm a slow learner. Nothing has advanced my craft so rapidly as spending time in the workshop environment. Not only have I received helpful critiques from my peers, but I've been given the opportunity to study their writing and humbly suggest ways it might be improved. The workshops in the Center for Writers provided deep immersion in narrative theory. They've made me a more attentive reader and more ambitious writer.

Soon I'll be on my own again, apart from the nurturing workshop environment. My immediate goal is to finish the novel manuscript *Shake This Noose*. After that, however, I only plan to continue taking risks and avoid repeating myself. I've never done well making plans. My compositional process isn't very intentional. I don't work from outlines or try writing toward particular themes, instead simply making it all up as I go along. Sometimes it works. Other times it doesn't. I've come to value the importance of being responsive, in both life and writing fiction. The improvised approach is all I know.

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## WORST AT NIGHT

Our auto-rivet man takes a piston through the bones of his hand and they close the plant two hours early. I need money but I don't argue. The man's in shock and the floor's a mess with blood. While they wait for an ambulance, our swing-shift manager wraps the man's shoulders with a blanket otherwise used for smothering oil fires. The lines are stopped, production halted. No one says a thing about it, we just grab our jackets and go our separate ways into the night.

Driving home I see my daughter, Sandy, smoking on the stoop of the house where she lives with her mother. Sandy is fifteen. I flash my lights and pull up against the grass—our town is rural enough that the streets have no curbs. Sandy pitches the cigarette and folds a stick of gum in her mouth.

“Where's your mother?” I call from the window of my truck.

“How come you're not at work?”

“There was an accident,” I say. “A man got hurt.”

Sandy balls up the gum wrapper and flings it into the grass. She comes down the lawn and rests her arms on the ledge of my window.

“It's after midnight,” I say. “Where's Rebecca?”

“You're off the beaten path. Are you checking up on me? Mom's out who knows where, by the way. It's just me.”

Sandy is light-skinned with freckles and knotty hair pulled back into a ponytail. Over her shoulder a television glows through the house window. It's often this way, I believe. Many nights after my shift I notice Rebecca's car gone from the driveway, even at a time well after the bars have closed. Still, there's little I can do about it. It's a custody

thing. I only stopped tonight having seen Sandy outside.

“You wouldn’t believe what Melody Markley said to me today. I hate my friends. It doesn’t matter, but I can’t sleep,” she says. “I’ll be late for school tomorrow. Mom already wrote me a note. Do you feel like driving around?”

“No,” I tell her. “I’m going home.”

“Take me with.”

“Not tonight, girl. It’s late.”

“Come on, no one’s missing me.” She reaches to the steering wheel and squeezes my hand. Then like an eager doe she glides through my headlights and comes around and climbs into the cab. “Mom won’t care,” she says. “Trust me, she won’t hardly notice.”

What Rebecca thinks no longer matters to me. She and I were never married, though for years we carried on through shouting fits and crying jags. We were volatile, and I was worse. I’d been prone to jealousy and destruction, and though one might say the drinking was to blame, in time I came to see that my true allergy was to Rebecca. And once nine or ten years ago I’d bottomed out and split for good, it so happened that keeping distance from her meant keeping distance from Sandy as well.

“Seatbelt,” I say. “And we need to talk about your smoking, miss.”

It’s fifteen minutes to my place, much of it dirt roads. Sandy tells me how Melody Markley is a junior with dyed-orange hair and three ear piercings. The two of them were friends until Melody had taken to calling Sandy “Marathon”—“because I still wear a sports bra,” Sandy explains, “like that’s a crime. And then Heather Burke starts up, too, so today in the parking lot I tell them to shut up, and Melody goes if I wanna cry about it I can blow my nose on the tissues in my bra, which isn’t true.”

I'm not sure how I'm meant to console her, so I tell her what my father and grandfather told me, that you don't let on to anyone you're hurt, that showing weakness or desperation is only blood in the water to sharks.

"Mom would tell me to steal their boyfriends."

"Rebecca's not the best role model," I say.

"Oh, no shit?"

My land is what you might call a hobby farm—eight head of swine and forty acres of alfalfa. It's rundown family land I've sold away parcel by parcel. Willow trees separate me from the neighboring fields, and bedstraw has overtaken my driveway save for two rutted lines from the wheels of my truck. This night's warm and windless, brightened by a full moon.

Inside, I lean over the kitchen sink with a cold meat sandwich while Sandy sprawls on the living room couch. I watch her flipping the pages of an outdoors magazine too fast to process them. "I'm not hungry, thank you," she calls to me. She kicks her boots onto the hardwood floor. In time I join her with a stack of mail, and she curls up her feet to allow me a cushion. "You'd think there's a quota in these magazines for grizzly bear articles," she says, lowering the spine. "Anything good, or just sweepstakes and lawyer bills?" Right then someone coughs from the direction of my bedroom.

Sandy drops her magazine. She slides up the couch and whispers, "What's that?" I raise a hand to keep her quiet. From my angle I see only my unmade bed and the clothes piled beside my nightstand, everything dark. "Someone's there," she says.

I hustle Sandy into the kitchen and sit her on a stool. "Stay here," I say. I hold her shoulders and tell her to breathe. "Just be still." From under the sink I take up what I can

find, a half-emptied paint can and a busted wooden broomstick. “Don’t move,” I tell Sandy.

I scan the spaces behind the furniture of my living room, look for bulges in the dusty curtains. There’s nothing moving, no shadows out of place. I cross until I can see my mattress and dresser, a shallow closet where the person might be hiding. Finally I reach around the doorframe and click the bedroom light.

On the floor against the far wall is a fat man lying facedown. He is very fat. He wears muddy canvas jeans and a short leather jacket from which his stomach pools out like he’d been poured there. His hands rest at his waist as swollen as mitts. Even his neck is fat, folding over itself as if looped by wires.

“Get up,” I tell the man.

“I’m drunk,” he says.

I prod his kidney with the broomstick. He squirms in the smallest way, as if burrowing himself into the floor. “Get up and walk out,” I say. “My daughter’s here.”

“I’m drunk,” he murmurs. “Untie my boots.”

The man’s hair is long and thin and draped over his face. He’s no one I know. I’ve never seen anyone so fat. “Who are you?”

“Untie my boots.”

I nudge him with my foot and jab him once more with the broomstick. “Please don’t,” he says. “I’m lost.” The treads of his boots, I see, are caked with mud and straw. I kneel and set the paint can on the floor, lift one leg at the ankle and begin untying the man’s boots.

“You stepped in shit,” I say. The man fidgets and I lose hold of his laces. Swiftly,

with the force of an angry mare, he stomps my chest and pitches me backward, where I smash the crown of my head against the wall. Everything flashes white. I hear the man's hands and knees scabble the ground. All at once he launches a shoulder at me and I duck and roll and scurry around beside the mattress. The man folds into the wall with a grunt.

I pounce on his back and punch him in the ribs, but it's like pummeling a sack of flour. He raises himself and easily bucks me off. Next thing he's smothering me, a forearm bar pinning my head to the floor. I grapple for the broomstick, anything, but my hand only sweeps the old hardwood. The man groans and soughs and his hair brushes my face and then I hear—I *feel*, like a firecracker—a solid thud, and the man's weight lifts off me.

I scoot back and prop myself against the wall, blinking everything into focus. At my side Sandy stands dappled with olive paint, the dented can swinging from her closed fist. To my other side is the fat man. He lies with his jacket tangled at his shoulders, motionless, having burst the closet doors from their hinges and collapsed them to splinters.

\*

Sandy and I drag the man by his wrists into the living room. His stringy hair parts over his face, revealing acne-scarred cheeks and bulbous lips, an eye that's puffy and crooked from where it absorbed the paint can. And though the man's breath stinks like meat, or cat food, there's no smell of liquor.

"You shouldna got down to his level," Sandy says. "He said what, untie his boots?"

We drop the man in the middle of the room. I instruct Sandy to untangle an

extension cord from a nearby lamp, which I use to hogtie him by his ankles. “Now go to the kitchen,” I tell her. “Wrap some ice in a towel and bring a few Tylenol.”

“He’s unconscious. He’ll gag on them.”

“Are you kidding?” I say. “For me. I’m the one with a headache.”

The man, on his back, makes a clicking noise as if he’s swallowing his tongue. I lean down and tug him onto his side, and as I do shimmering light plays at the corners of my eyes. I give it a moment. Then I kneel and begin sifting through the man’s pockets.

All that’s in his jeans are two dimes and a book of matches, a soft pack of unfiltered cigarettes, now flattened, which I tuck into my shirt pocket. In his jacket I find a roll of twenty-dollar bills—mine, taken from the battery compartment of a baton flashlight in my nightstand. He’d also found a wax envelope of old calf-roping medals worth nothing to anyone but me. In an inside breast pocket I find the man’s wallet.

“Who is he?”

“I’m a little blurry around the eyes,” I say, handing the wallet to Sandy. She gives me the cold towel and I sit back on the couch. At first the ice only worsens the throbbing on top of my head, but then it smoothes out, and I dry-swallow the Tylenol.

“Denny Thorpe,” she reads. “Not Dennis, Denny. From Arizona. He’s fat for being from Arizona. It says he’s five-ten, two-fifty. Well—” She studies the ID card and then the man on the floor. “He’s bigger now.”

“There’s Thorpes around this county. Maybe he’s got family here.”

Sandy pulls a few other slips from his wallet. “Two cards for auto detailers, a credit thing for ‘Dodge City Rentals.’ I don’t know.”

“He’s a petty thief,” I say, “a penny-ante crook.” I tell Sandy about the roll of

bills and the rodeo medals. “Men like this keep whatever sticks to their fingers. They scavenge for copper wire and abandon cars when they’re out of gas. I know his type. Sandy, don’t stand so close to him.”

“Should I call the cops?”

“And say what? No, you shouldn’t even be here,” I say. “And I don’t exactly want to answer their questions. Let me think.”

If indeed Denny Thorpe is a vagabond, he entered my house by chance. Or I could be wrong, and he might be a goon sicced on me by any number of folks I’d wronged when I’d been at my worst about Rebecca and a terror around town. If that’s so, I’ve already—we’ve already—battered him enough to send a message. We won’t turn in Denny Thorpe, but neither will we be around when he awakens.

“Sandy, put your boots on. Do you know Arnie and Linda Thorpe? They live four miles that way. Arnie used to run cattle but now he rents out his land for corn.”

“I don’t know those guys.”

“You don’t need to,” I say. “They keep to themselves.” I explain to Sandy that we’ll drag Denny out and load him in the back of my truck, and we’ll dump him at the Thorpe farm. He could be their kin or he could be nobody, but we’ll dump him there just the same. What happens after that will be no concern of ours.

\*

Sandy and I retrieve an old snow sled from the tack barn outside. It’s past one now and the moon glints off the ribbing of my steel grain bins. I look for Denny’s car, truck or motorcycle, but there is none. One hog whines softly from its pen.

Back inside we roll Denny onto the sled and lead him out the entryway of the

house. The front steps are concrete and steep, and easing him down proves a task. I drag the sled outward, dropping its tail one step at a time, but then the plastic rim buckles in my hand and Denny tumbles down the remaining steps, his face grinding to a halt on the sidewalk.

Sandy pops in a stick of gum. “Well, what’s another scrape?”

My hand sets off a burning sensation along my arm. I raise it to my face only for blood to scatter the air. The sled, when it buckled, had split the flesh on the crease inside my knuckles, leaving a deep crimson gash. “Dad, *shit*—” Sandy rushes inside and returns to fold my hand around a kitchen towel. “Just, hold on,” she says. After a moment, she re-folds the towel and wraps it with electrical tape, which she then slices with a box cutter from her jeans pocket.

“Where’d that come from?”

“This little razor?” She shifts the dull, rusty blade up and down. “Junk drawer. I was just grabbing things when we first heard the guy.”

“Get rid of it,” I tell her. “Nothing good will come of that.”

Below us, Denny Thorpe groans. He puts an arm on the concrete and tries rolling to his side. But he’s only semi-conscious, punch-drunk. I reach down and club him with the heel of my good fist. He lets out a small puff of air between his greasy lips, and then he’s still.

The sled moves easily across the lawn, beating down the wheatgrass and leaving a part in its wake. Sandy takes my keys and reverses the truck along the driveway, to where I drop the tailgate above Denny.

“You lift his ankles,” I say. “I’ll get him by the wrists.”



“That is not going to work. We might need a skid steer, or a payloader.”

Instead we sit him upright by yanking his collar until his chin slumps against his chest. Next we try standing him up, but his arms are too doughy to get a handle. “I’ll find a rope,” I say. “We’ll make a halter and lead him over the tailgate.”

“Wait, let’s try this.” She squats down and plies the crook of her elbow into Denny’s armpit. “Little help here,” she says. “Other side.” Together we hoist him up against the light panel, and I plow him with my shoulder onto the tailgate. We roll him once and tuck his legs, then Sandy unties his ankles and flings the extension cord over to my front door. “Guess what Melody Markley’s doing right now. Probably lying in bed sucking her thumb,” Sandy says. “No joke, she has to wear a retainer. Are those cigarettes?”

I put my hand to my shirt pocket. “They were in his jacket.”

“Well, guess what I just found in his sock.”

She offers out a four-inch piece of bone—animal bone with intricate carvings and dark polish in the recesses. It shows a wilderness scene of spruce trees, mountains and deer. It’s a folding knife—or, more accurately, a straight razor—thick and hefty, longer even than Sandy’s palm. She flicks the steel nub at one end and releases the blade.

“We kinda screwed up,” she says. “That coulda been trouble.”

“I’ll say.” I take the knife and fold it closed and slide it into my back pocket. And despite everything I begin to laugh. “And you thought you stood a chance with a box cutter.”

\*

I’m securing the tailgate when I hear gravel spinning out along the road. A car

passes my driveway and continues maybe fifty feet, then stops and weaves backward in reverse. It turns in with its high beams showing. I crouch beside the truck and call for Sandy to get down in the cab.

The car—a little one, a coupe or mid-size—bottoms out against some rainwater ruts and loses the trail of the driveway. Then it overcorrects, swerves and nearly clips the front end of my truck. The brake lights flare and it comes to a stop, crookedly, well before the concrete pad of my barn.

“Who is it?” Denny says, his voice raspy and full of phlegm. I lean over the cargo box and thump him on the temple.

The car is Rebecca’s—a two-door Cutlass Ciera, dirty gray, the rear fender collapsed. I’d smashed that fender with a shovel ten years back, when I’d discovered Rebecca in the backseat with another man.

“I’ll handle this,” I tell Sandy. “You stay here.”

“What about the fat guy?”

I look down at Denny. He’s breathing steadily through his open mouth. “All right, let’s be quick.”

Rebecca appears to have lain across the front seat of the Cutlass. There’s an orange glow from the dashboard lights and the radio plays a country song, an outlaw tune with fiddles and smoky baritone. I rap the driver-side window. Rebecca rears up and starts talking at us. “Turn the music down,” I shout. I motion for her to roll down the window.

“There you are,” she says. “Terry, you dumb son of a bitch. Sandy, *get* in this car. You’re in some shit, little lady. Why’s your clothes all green and what the hell are you

grinning at? What's with the mitt, Terry, you dumb shit sack? I don't care. *Get* in the car, Sandy. I am *not* happy. I am pissed."

"Good idea to drive, Mom."

I reach in and kill the ignition. I throw the keys far off into the grass. "You're here at the wrong time, Rebecca. Go inside and lie down."

"Oh, you lie down. I'll tell you what to do for once." She opens the door and teeters out onto the gravel. "Huh, what's the meaning?"

I glance back at my truck: over the side panel I can see the moonlight glimmering off Denny's leather jacket. Time matters right now. I can't fuss with Rebecca. Sandy shrugs at me and says, "Dad, we have to go. Bring her with."

"Go inside, Rebecca," I say, but she just sweeps her hair from her eyes and folds her arms. "I'm doing you a favor. I'd just as soon you went and smashed your car into a tree."

"*Dad*," Sandy says and takes her by the elbow. "Come on, Mom. You don't understand."

Rebecca gets a look at Denny Thorpe and trills a low whistle. "That man is F-A-T fat. Who is this piece of shit?"

"He's a Thorpe."

"That doesn't mean nothing to me."

"Make a decision right now," I tell Rebecca. "Go inside and sleep it off or get in the truck and let's go. We'll explain on the way."

Sandy slides the bench forward and tests the pedals, and soon our tires are rumbling over the washboard road. Rebecca sits between us, staring back at Denny

Thorpe. She says, “How’d you meet this dude?”

“I *met* him because he was lying in wait on my bedroom floor. He’s not what I’d call a friend,” I say. “He’s nobody.”

“You ought to lock your doors. I’d wager he didn’t sneak through no window.”

“No, we think he climbed through the vents,” Sandy says.

I turn and check on Denny. His head bounds against the ribs of the truck bed, an empty jug of antifreeze lodged below his stomach. Our taillights show plumes of dust spreading up from the wheels.

Rebecca starts crying. “What is this?” she says. “This is endangerment. How’d we get here? Sandy, you’re supposed to have it better than we did. We’re supposed to make better lives for our kids.” She wipes a snuffle on the cuff of her sleeve. “Sandy, you’ll be tough if you survive us. I’m so goddamn angry at you, Terry—” She turns and punches me in the chest, only once, then cups her hands on her cheeks. “—and I know I fucked up worse than you. It’s Wednesday night or Thursday night and this is what’s become of us.”

“Actually, I like this.”

“Sandy, promise me this won’t happen again.”

“How would I promise that?”

“Jesus, Rebecca, shut up.”

“Here, Mom, have a piece of gum.”

Up ahead is the shelterbelt of the Thorpe farm. We’re cutting a line between overgrown ditches, beyond them rows of loose soil recently disked. I tell Sandy to cut the lights and ease off the accelerator. “Listen, here’s what we’ll do,” I say. “Sandy, you

coast up their half-circle driveway and park near the house. You and me will step out and leave our doors open—no noise. Rebecca, you keep your ass glued to the seat. I'll drop the tailgate and then me and Sandy will each grab one of Denny's ankles and tug, and we'll be gone before he even hits the ground."

Sandy nods. "Okay," she says.

The rear window panel slides open. A meaty fist plunges past Rebecca's head, clutches the rear-view mirror and rips it from the glass.

"Get down," I shout. Rebecca covers herself and ducks into my lap. "Sandy, scoot!" She slides against the door, her knuckles white on the steering wheel.

In the space between us, Denny Thorpe swings the mirror frame like a hammer. I pound at him with my towel-wrapped hand, and then I curl my arm around his and we lock elbows. His shoulder fills the gap of the window panel, leather squeaking against the chrome. Rebecca reaches up and claws at Denny's hand and pries away the mirror. He gropes the air and finds Sandy's ponytail, yanks her in short bursts toward the center of the cab. "*Dad!*"

"Keep straight," I yell. "Eyes forward."

"The knife!"

Before I can reach it, Rebecca howls, twists her body and bites down on the meat of Denny's thumb. He withdraws from the cab and staggers back on his feet, his arms out for balance like he's riding a wave. In the moonlight I can see his face dark and bloodied, the white of his one eye. His hair thrashes in the wind like a flame. He reaches down and lifts his pant leg, pats his sock.

Sandy then stomps the gas and jerks the wheel. Denny rolls backward, his full

weight slamming against the tailgate, which booms with the volume of a 12-gauge. The tailgate releases, dumping Denny onto the gravel behind us. The antifreeze jug tumbles out into the darkness.

The truck fishtails. Sandy jogs the wheel, but our tail end swings over and pummels Arnie and Linda's mailbox. It folds beneath us with a thump. Sandy steers back onto a straight path. She shifts to neutral, bringing us to a stop without revealing our brake lights. She makes a fist in the air and says, "Tough."

A dog barks at the Thorpe house. Their windows light up from the inside. "Drive," I tell Sandy. "Keep the lights off. Get over this hill." Two yellow labs appear on the lawn, sniffing around until one seems to catch a scent. It barks twice and the dogs trot, nose down, to where Denny Thorpe must have crawled into the ditch. And soon enough our truck rolls over the hill and out of sight.

"That enormous man clocked me in the ear," Rebecca says. "I can't hear nothing but the sea."

A mile later we find an intersection and turn onto a paved county road. The night is quiet but for the sound of our engine. "Sandy," I say. I watch her across the cab, but her face appears cast by shadows. "I want you to forget this happened."

"I won't talk." She snaps her fingers at me. I pull the cigarettes from my shirt pocket and fling them out the window. "Not the cigarettes," she tells me. "I want the knife."

## FRICASSEE

Tuesday was the Duggins's fifth anniversary. Kaitlyn worked, so she got up around nine. She was applying mascara when Chip slipped into the bathroom and said he had an idea. Tonight he would surprise her by cooking a special dinner: chicken fricassee. Because he just told her, she said, he'd ruined the surprise. "And it's pronounced frick-uh-see," she added.

Chip handed her a coffee mug and then sat on the rim of the tub. "I thought it was *assy*," he said, pulling a recipe card from his bathrobe. "Frick-assy."

Kaitlyn capped her mascara. Her face was done up and she was dressed in her blacks. She worked at the airport, as a waitress in the Skymasters Club. Chip at present was not working. He was an athletic but shapeless man who'd probably gone too long between haircuts.

"Fricassee," she said. "Do you even know what that is?"

"Nope," he confessed, blowing over his own coffee. "But it sounds fancy. Case in point, I didn't know how to say it."

Kaitlyn leaned into the mirror, pulling back the skin around her eyes. "Maybe we should do fricassee together, another time. It's a weeknight," she said. "I might need to stay late."

"Don't stay late tonight, Katie, please," Chip said. "Most people only get one five-year anniversary."

She turned up her hands, like *What am I supposed to do?* Then she said, "Ew, what's this?" Her coffee was glossed by an oily sheen. She spun the mug, and the liquid reflected green and purple.

“Yeah, I topped yours with Reddi-wip,” Chip said. “I think it was expired anyway. You shouldn’t drink that. Dinner at six,” he said. “My anniversary gift: fricassee, potatoes, some other crap, red wine.”

“White wine if it’s chicken.”

“Just wait for dinner, Miss Food Critic. I’ll figure this out,” he promised. “You’ll be surprised.”

“If you really want to surprise me,” Kaitlyn said, “you can look for a job.”

Chip returned the recipe card to his bathrobe pocket. “Touché,” he said, going to the sink and giving her a full squeeze from behind.

\*

At the grocery store that morning he zigzagged among the aisles, working his way down the recipe card. The basic ingredients he and Kaitlyn had at home already. For the others, Chip selected the freshest he could find—cooking oil imported from Florence, free-range chicken pieces, organic vegetables. Gourmet everything!

Then he came upon the last ingredient: *fresh ground basil*.

“Spice aisle,” said a woman stocking the greens cooler.

“Tried it,” Chip said. “I tried the bulk canisters by the nuts and tea leaves, too. Here—” He handed the woman his recipe card. “Today’s my anniversary.”

The woman had short gray hair and no makeup. She took a pair of glasses from her store apron and studied the card. “I don’t get the problem,” she said. “Basil, so what?”

“There was nothing *fresh* in the spice aisle,” Chip said. “Or *ground*, for that matter.”



The woman looked again at the recipe card. “*Fresh ground basil* doesn’t mean anything special. And one-quarter teaspoon is all. For that amount you might as well use grass clippings.”

“I don’t think so,” Chip said. “I’m doing this by the book.”

The woman glanced at him over her rim of her glasses. The automatic sprayers above the greens switched on, hissing a fine mist into the air.

“Sure, you want to be a perfectionist,” she said. “Go to a co-op if you care so much.” She returned the card and waited for him to move. “Do you need cabbage? I have this whole cart of cabbage,” she said. “No? Then good-bye. And happy anniversary.”

“You too,” Chip said.

From there he drove to a nearby commerce park, where he went into a package shop and chose two bottles of the second-least-expensive wine. Back outside he searched “co-op” on his phone, but it was a broad term. He fussed with the map feature until he gave up and tore into a box of fruit snacks. Overhead, the sun was big and surly. Across the parking lot was a new store, a golfing boutique called Duffer’s Dream. Its windows featured a colorful appliqué of a golf cart half-buried in a sand bunker, along with the message SINK PUTTS, NOT BUTTS. He walked over and went inside.

The air inside Duffer’s Dream was cool and tranquil. At first Chip combed through the patterned shorts and polos, attempting the motions of a serious customer. Then he worked his way to the back in search of clearance items. He picked out a Big Bertha Diablo, an oversized driver with a clubface the size of a skillet.

“Good head, am I right?” said a young salesman out of nowhere. The salesman was tan with spiky blond hair. His shirt collar was erect, and he had tiny gold studs in

each ear. “The Diablo,” he said. “Major wood. Heh.”

“I can’t buy anything,” Chip said. “My wife would have my balls if I dropped—” he checked the price tag, “three hundred bucks on a golf club.” He returned the Diablo to its display. “It’s my anniversary.”

“Sure, three hundo’s a lot of scratch,” said the boy, Percy according to his nametag. “But your gear is an investment. You can’t put a price on quality.” He shuffled his hands like scales weighing one illogical point against the next. “Bro, you wouldn’t bike the Tour de France in training wheels, would you? Or play a game of 5-on-5 in flip-flops? Wait,” he said. “Did you say anniversary?”

Chip held up an outspread hand. “Five years.”

“Five years... of *marriage*?” Percy went bug-eyed. “Why aren’t you partying? We should party. I like to party.” He snatched the Diablo from the display. “Follow me,” he told Chip, then he yelled to another salesman whose face was buried in a magazine that he’d be out back.

They went through a small stock room and halted before a fire-exit door. For dramatic effect, Percy whispered a countdown from three. Then he kicked the door open. No alarm sounded. The door opened onto a large patch of fake feathery sod, green and glistening. A few dozen balls littered the ground. Green nylon nets formed something like a cage, separating the range from where the concrete sloped down to an embankment beside the freeway.

“Check it, dude!” said Percy. “This is our demo range! I built it myself! That’s not true.” He kicked the balls up against the side of the building, placed one on a rubberized tee and handed the Diablo to Chip. “Happy anniversary. You’re up, champ.”

“Wow,” Chip said. “Just wow. Thanks, Percy.”

“My friends call me P-Dawg,” he said, settling into a canvas sling chair.

Chip approached the tee. He took a deep breath and set his stance, kneading the grip of the club. Cars hummed far off on the freeway, making a relaxing, stream-like sound. Then Chip hauled off and drilled his teeshot, heaving the net forward. The club rang pitch perfect.

He examined the Diablo, awestruck. At Percy’s urging he set up another shot, then another. The club was swift and he handled it deftly. He got to talking. “I can’t miss. This thing’s got a face like a hockey stick. Hoo-ee! What is this, aluminum, titanium? Sure is light.” Finally his shoulders began feeling heavy. “That was boss,” he said. “I haven’t swung in a while. I’m forming a blister already.”

“A blister, seriously? When we get inside we’ll find you a nice glove.”

Chip put out the club toward Percy. “You got a handicap?”

“Don’t laugh,” Percy said, teeing up and taking a practice swing. “Plus twenty-eight. You?”

“I drink too much and my game goes to pot by the sixth hole.”

Percy snorted a laugh and shanked his drive. “Well played,” he said. Then he took his turn with the club, pounding his drives forward into the net. “Boom! Moonshot!” he yelled. “Pow! That one woulda cleared the highway and smashed the glass at Jo-Ann Fabrics.”

The sun had moved over the store, leaving the two of them in shade.

“Hey, P-Dawg. This is a long shot, but you guys aren’t hiring, are you?”

Percy gave him a painted-on grin. “You can list me as a reference.” He offered a

fist for bumping. “Hey, where’s the better half? How come you’re here alone on your anniversary?”

“Wife’s working today,” Chip said. “I’m on dinner duty.” He explained about Kaitlyn and the fricassee. The problem was that he hardly knew what fricassee was, he said, and wouldn’t truly know until he started the recipe.

“Dude, what a hassle,” Percy said. “Fancy dinner, why try? Just surprise her at work with a box of chocolates.”

“Can’t. She works at the airport. They got security.”

“Maybe flowers? Handmade card. Racy text message?”

“I promised fricassee,” Chip said. Then he described his troubles with the fresh ground basil. He was going to try a co-op next, once he figured out what and where a co-op was.

Percy shrugged. He ran a finger around his ear canal. “I know a co-op, across town by my mom’s house. You can give me a ride, I’ll show you. Not that I still live with my mom. I do but it’s temporary,” Percy said. “So, now, let’s go inside and look at the gloves. You don’t *have* to buy one, but I am paid on commission.”

\*

On the freeway Percy began futzing with the radio. He tuned to an urban station and attempted falsetto harmony. Chip hit the preset button for classic rock. Percy scanned ahead to conservative talk, then country ballads, then he turned off the stereo completely.

“Pee-ew!” he said, pinching his nose. “Smells like dead animal in here.”

“No, it doesn’t. Just some groceries in the backseat.” Chip cranked down his window. “I think you’re sitting on my fruit snacks.”

“On purpose,” Percy said. “I like my fruit snacks soft.”

They crossed a long bridge, eight lanes wide. A semi-trailer whizzed by and sent out a gust of wind. The recipe card floated off the dashboard and hovered briefly in place, then flashed toward the driver-side window. Percy grabbed, missed, and punched Chip in the ear. A speedy red car beside them squeaked its horn. “Got it,” Percy said, reaching back and digging the card from one of the grocery sacks. “Close call.”

Then another gust came through and pasted the job application over Percy’s face. Chip tried snatching it and got a finger in Percy’s nose, but the application fluttered out the open window. It danced away along the pavement behind them, finally disappearing under the tires of a white SUV.

“You don’t want to work at Duffer’s Dream anyway,” Percy said, peeling open a package of fruit snacks. “Minimum wage and you gotta hustle for commission. Besides, you’re a grown man. I’m just a bro living with his mom trying to get back into community college. Take this exit.”

Percy’s co-op was a major dive. The storefront windows were large but streaky, and the inside had actual dirt floors. There were no overhead lights, no fixtures even. Herbs seemed possible from the cracks of each display.

“Where are we, P-Dawg?” Chip said.

“Barn? You’re on your own,” Percy said. “Nachos, nachos, where are the nachos?”

The spices were packaged in glass jars with the names stenciled onto plain white labels. When a girl with a co-op lanyard approached, Chip explained the problem: anniversary dinner, chicken fricassee, fresh ground basil. The girl seemed momentarily

perplexed. Then she plucked a jar from the shelf. “Basil,” she said. “So what’s the stress?”

Chip showed her the recipe card. “I need *fresh* basil,” he said. “*Ground*, too.”

“Huh? Don’t be so literal,” the girl said. “Same thing.” She was pretty in her own bohemian way. She seemed small beneath her wild, tangled hair and her loose-fitting tunic. “Oh, you’re thinking is *ground basil* different from regular *basil*, the way *groundhog* is different from *hog*.”

“Maybe,” Chip said. “Is it?”

“No.”

“No what, the basil or the groundhog?”

“Well, hello,” said Percy, sidling up between Chip and the girl. Percy was holding a tabby cat. He rubbed the cat’s head, and the cat purred contentedly.

“You found Jenkins,” said the girl. “Jenkins is the cat. Hi Jenkins.” She reached out with both hands and massaged the cat’s ears. “My name’s Clover.”

“Chip’s making dinner for his wife,” Percy explained. “It’s his anniversary. We’re looking for something called basil.”

“I’ve been told,” Clover said.

“This is my friend Percy,” Chip said. “He’s helping.”

“You can call me P-Dawg.”

“No, I’ll call you Percy,” said Clover. “Just get basil. It’s all the same.”

She took the cat down and set it on the floor, and it sauntered back to Percy. He bent down and made a bristling sound with his fingers. Chip stood scrutinizing the jar of basil.

“Well, go on now,” Clover said. “You’re dismissed. You’ll do fine with the fricassee. Most people could cook that in their sleep.” She attempted to usher them toward the cash register. “What now? Why the look?”

“I’m scared,” Chip said. He rolled the jar between his palms. “This is getting really complicated. I just eat cereal. One cookbook said something about a meat thermometer? Kaitlyn, my wife, she’s going to think I’m beyond hope. I haven’t worked since March. I’m spinning my wheels here. Fricassee, fresh ground basil? I haven’t even showered yet today.”

Clover was fidgeting with one her wide fabric bracelets. “Wow,” she said, “you *are* screwed.” She blinked a few times in succession. “Okay, I know someone who can help,” she said. “Her name’s Clover and she used to cook at the bistro across the street.” She looked back and forth between Chip and Percy. “*Me—*” she finally said. “I’ll help. Jenkins comes too. We’re a package deal.”

\*

Chip regained the freeway, Clover riding shotgun and Percy in back with the cat. Cars were swarming for the evening rush. Road construction made matters worse. In time everyone came to a standstill. “This little dude’s well behaved,” said Percy. “Who’s a sleepy kitty?”

“He got into the chamomile ointment earlier,” Clover said. “Oof, kinda stinks in here, like something died. Chip, you have pots and pans and stuff, right?”

“Right.”

“Because no offense, but you didn’t know what basil was.”

“Basil is a culinary herb,” Percy said, “often used in Italian coo, coo-is…”

cuisine.” He scrolled down on the screen of his phone. “Sometimes it’s called Saint Joseph’s Wort. You don’t get warts from eating it, do you?”

“You two need a lesson on where your food comes from,” Clover said. “Look at all these fruit snack wrappers. Do you have any idea what you’re putting in your bodies? Chip, you’re eating too many carbs, Percy too much salt and fake sugar. I can tell just by looking.”

“This wine is like boiling back here,” Percy announced.

When given the chance Chip exited onto a frontage road, and from there steered through byways and back streets leading them home. He pulled under the carport, and they all went inside and spread the groceries out over the kitchen counter.

“Uh oh,” said Chip.

“Uh oh what?” said Percy.

“Uh oh this.” He hung the package of chicken between his thumb and forefinger. The meat had turned gamy in the midday sun, its flesh cloudy and gray. And the mushrooms had darkened, the green peppers gone loose. The entire array smelled of carcass. Chip stuffed everything into a plastic sack and jammed it in the freezer. “Ten minutes,” he said. “We need to unspoil everything.”

“Wait, what? That’s not how food works,” Clover said, pulling the groceries from the freezer and assessing them.

“That’s not how food works, Chip,” said Percy. “Even I knew that.”

“Unsalvageable. Chicken, you died in vain.” Clover shut her eyes and wagged her head. Jenkins appeared on the counter nosing around the plastic sack. “Chip, there will be no fricassee tonight. I’m sorry. But really? Fricassee’s sloppy, salty, and enough to make



me barf, anyway. We can still impress your wife. Is that her?" She indicated a portrait on the refrigerator door.

"*That?*" Chip said. "No, that's Franken Berry. I'm saving box tops for a t-shirt. *That's* Kaitlyn." He pointed to a different picture on the fridge, in which Kaitlyn was outdoors in a backless dress. "That's from a friend's wedding last fall."

"Nuh uh," Percy cried. "That's Kaitlyn?"

"She's gorgeous!" Clover said. "And you're kind of... Okay, you're in a down phase right now. Dinner tonight is how we raise you up. Let's focus."

The two of them rummaged the cupboards while Percy dumped the spoiled food out beside the house. "Let's see, let's see," Clover said. "Yuck, look at all this processed junk." She pitched taffy and cookie wafers and bright orange crackers into the trash. Chip sorted through a tall skinny pantry and said, "Uh, whoops, here's two jars of basil." Once Percy returned they had laid their findings on the counter—pasta and rice, instant potatoes, seasoning packets, canned goods of indeterminate vintage.

"Okay, this can work," Clover said. "We need this, this, not this..." She explained that they could make something like pasta bowls. It basically would be a mish-mash. Twice-baked, with a potato base. "Just trust me, okay, follow my lead," she said. "Chip, we're calling you the sous chef. Percy, you just, uh, here—" she said, handing him a sleeve of bagels. "Pluck out all these raisins. And wash your hands!"

They got to work. Clover set the dials on the oven and salted a large pot of water. At her request, Chip drained a can of butter beans and one of loose corn, then squashed two wrinkly old tomatoes with a meat tenderizer. Water came to a boil on the stovetop, and she had Chip measure two cups for the instant potatoes.

“Time out,” Percy said. “I’m wrecking these bagels.” He wandered down a hallway.

“What are you looking for?” Chip called. “I think he likes you,” he said to Clover.

“And I like him,” she said. “Restrained, with duct tape over his mouth, tossed in the back of a towncar. Actually, he’s not that bad. He’s trying his best. Like you.” She grasped a handful of spaghetti and gauged its thickness. “Get those stoneware bowls. All that dust. Rinse ‘em out, *good*, got it?”

Percy bounded back into the kitchen. “Look, I’m gonna use this tweezers on the bagels,” he said. “Why am I doing this, Clover?”

“So you won’t get in my way,” she said.

Percy shrugged and kept at it. “Does kitty want raisins?” he said, and Clover slapped his hand with a plastic spatula.

Next they coated the inside of two bowls with instant potatoes. It looked weird, but Clover assured them it was part of the plan. She misted the potato spread with butter from a spray bottle. “Right, we’ll bake those suckers maybe eight, ten minutes, until they’re good and brown,” she said. She placed the tomato-and-vegetable mixture over a low heat.

Finally they began the pasta. In addition to the spaghetti they had little colored bowties, which darted and spun in the bubbles of the big iron pot. It got steamy in the kitchen. Chip switched on an exhaust fan over the stovetop, which made a harsh buzzing noise and then suddenly stopped and rained sparks down onto the burners. “Yeah, doesn’t get much use,” he said. “Pasta’s fine, though.”

Percy was snacking on orange crackers. “I know you’re gonna say. And what’s

worse,” he asked through a mouthful of crumbs, “eating unhealthy food, or wasting it when there’s kids starving in Africa?”

“Actually, that was halfway sensible,” Clover said. “That wasn’t the grossest thing you’ve said or done all afternoon. Potato bowls,” she said.

The instant potatoes had cooked to a peanut-like brown in the oven, crispy but not burnt. But they weren’t finished yet, Clover said. She asked Chip to drain the pasta, blend it with the vegetable sauce and add it over the potatoes. Percy was at the ready with a zip-top bag of shredded white cheese. Ten more minutes in the oven, Clover said, reaching for the bowls with a pot holder.

“Wait,” Chip said, “if I may.” He took a white-leather glove from his back pocket and snipped off the price tag. “With credit to P-Dawg.” He put on the glove and returned the two bowls to the oven. “That actually burned my fingertips. That wasn’t a smart thing to do,” he said. “Okay guys, now I have an idea. Bread pudding. Those bagel pieces, the raisins, old banana, that half-and-half. And, Clover, permission to take those wafers from the garbage?”

“It’s your special dinner,” she said.

Chip’s idea was just to mash everything together. He used the meat tenderizer, and then the whisk. When he sampled the pudding his face went from disgust to consideration begrudging tolerance. Clover nudged past him and splashed something dark into the pudding. “Vanilla, you dummies,” she said to Chip and Percy’s odd stares. “In case you wanna taste your food.”

\*

They had the table set by the time Kaitlyn’s truck sounded up the driveway. Chip

straightened the napkins and aligned the silverware. “Look sharp, you two,” he said. “Here she comes.”

Kaitlyn entered through the side door. Her keys plunked down on an entryway table. She turned into the kitchen, gave a little start, and halted in place.

“Katie, hear me out,” Chip began. “I wanted nothing more than to please you tonight. You deserve the best. That’s why I came up with the fricassee idea. My intentions were good. But there’s no fricassee. I didn’t do what I promised. Please don’t take this as a measure of my devotion, Katie. I have something even better, maybe.”

Kaitlyn had untucked her black work shirt. Her nametag hung crookedly from her breast pocket. Her eyes looked tired and her ponytail had fallen loose. She looked down at the cat butting its head against her ankle.

“Jenkins, come here,” Clover said. “Hi. I’m Clover. That’s Percy.”

“P-Dawg,” Percy said. “Nice house, Mrs. Chip. Small but charming. I see you have a spare bedroom.”

An egg timer rang just then. Clover took the pasta bowls from the oven. “You’re gonna like this,” Chip said. But when Kaitlyn saw the dinner, she turned without a word, took her keys and left out the side door.

“I know,” Chip said. “I should follow her.”

And he did follow her. He went through the carport and into the driveway, where Kaitlyn stood leaning against the hood of her truck. Chip said her name, but she raised a hand and shushed him.

“You said your piece,” she told him. “Now it’s my turn.” This was rock bottom, Kaitlyn told him. Nothing was what she might have hoped for five years ago. Chip

wasn't being serious, he wasn't being resilient, and he'd put an onus on her. Did he think she was happy being a waitress? When could she quit her job and find something new? Not now, not while Chip had no income. She told him all the things he already knew. She wasn't giving up, she said, if that's what he was worried about. But sometimes she felt like tugging her hair or clawing her eyes in frustration.

She opened the truck door and climbed in. Chip backed away to let her go. But then she emerged toting a plastic sack from the Skymasters Club, the sides of which stretched with two Styrofoam containers.

“What's that?”

“What do you think?” She dropped the tailgate and opened one of the containers. It held a glop of mushrooms and celery and peppers, chicken meat and gray gravy. The stuff was warm, sweating up the inside of the Styrofoam lid.

“That's what fricassee looks like? Uck.”

“Surprise,” Kaitlyn said. “Don't mistake this as forgiveness. I doubted you and it shouldn't be that way. Don't force me to make back-up plans.” She stopped him before he could apologize. “No more words. Actions,” she said. “Like today, except better.”

Following that, they ate. The first bites were really good, but then the fricassee got messy. The gravy slopped around and spilled onto the tailgate. Because the chicken hadn't been de-boned, it bent and snapped their plastic silverware. Chip remarked that fricassee, in fact, tasted like shit, and Kaitlyn said she could have told him that this morning. They both quit before they were full.

“Who are those kids in the kitchen? Actually, save it. Right now I don't care.” Kaitlyn wiped her lips on her shirtsleeve. “You know what I could stand? Chocolate

milkshake from the Scoop Shack.”

“Yes,” Chip said. “You drive. My car has a smell in it.”

“You’re forgetting something.” Kaitlyn nodded to the front bay window, where indiscreetly Percy and Clover were peeking around the curtains.

“Young love,” Chip said. “Let them be. They won’t go hungry.”

## BEACON LIGHT

At age fourteen Rachel Dahl got in bad with a boy. The boy's name was Brad Van Laecken. He was three years older but he wasn't in school.

One weekend Brad and his uncle had a poolside room in the large atrium of a hotel. Rachel was there for a friend's birthday party. All afternoon the friend's dad had been keeping watch on Brad and his uncle, who were sitting at a patio table drinking out of plastic cups. They'd been keeping to themselves, but anyone could tell their thoughts. The birthday girl, she was now thirteen. She and her friends were all wearing two-piece suits. Finally her dad approached Brad and his uncle and asked them to leave.

"Excuse me," said the uncle, spitting out a wafer of ice. "You want us to leave? And why's that?"

"To be honest, you're making me nervous," said the friend's dad.

This was February in Duluth. One wall of the atrium was all windows. It wasn't yet five o'clock, but already it was dark out.

"I don't believe you're within your rights," said the uncle. "We're paying guests at this hotel. You're just a guy in tan pants and leather shoes."

The friend's dad turned to see the girls as Brad and his uncle saw them, in the shallow end of the pool, some floating on curved foam noodles, others playing keep-away with an inflatable ball. The girls were lithe and lively, untiring, but no doubt they were *girls*—pale skin and braces, doughy arms, high-pitched voices clanging off the surface of the water. Only Rachel Dahl was outside the group. She sat with her legs dangling in the Jacuzzi, wet hair like palm fronds matting her neck and shoulders. Water roiled from the jets and steamed up the air around her.

The next Fourth of July Rachel lay on a blanket by Lake Superior with her friend Helen Voight. It was dusk at Canal Park and the food vendors were out along the boardwalk. In the air was a drifting haze—the Kiwanis Club had been handing out sparklers.

Someone came and stood over Rachel’s blanket. “I know you,” said a boy in black jeans and a sleeveless shirt. “Holiday Inn. Remember me?” Rachel looked to Helen Voight, who shook her head. “It was someone’s birthday,” said the boy. “You remember.”

“No,” Rachel said, “you’re thinking of someone else.”

“You had on a polka-dot top. Your hair was longer then, and blond.”

“Ugh, go away, would you?” said Helen Voight. She flitted her hand like he was no more than a mosquito. “How gross,” she said once he’d left.

The fireworks began over the water, launched from a barge a few hundred yards off shore. They started slowly, with blue and red blasts. The theme that year was Philly Freedom, and at one point the rockets went up and made the form of a golden Liberty Bell, crack and everything. Shells exploded like beats on a steel drum. Sparks surged outward and lit the sky so brightly it seemed like the middle of the day.

Afterward there was applause, and a tinny version of “This Land Is Your Land” played from speakers by a bandshell. Rachel rolled her blanket and she and Helen went to where their bikes were chained against a large black statue of a nautical anchor. “Don’t look now, but he’s standing by his car,” Helen said. “Out on the street—don’t look.”



The car was a Ford Mustang, one of the boxy, ugly-year models. It was lit from above in a halo of streetlight, its driver-side door open and the boy resting his arms over the frame. Rachel began walking her bike over.

“Wrong way,” Helen said. “Rachel... *Rachel!* All right, bye. Rachel, call me, will you?”

*[Slow Down Boy]*

Brad was neither charming nor witty, but he was tall and his arms were tan. He complimented Rachel’s eyeliner and asked what all her bracelets meant, and he said the two of them ought to drive around the cabins up north and watch the rich folks’ fireworks. That was more commitment than Rachel wanted, though. She told Brad to keep talking. He recalled seeing her by the hotel pool—Super Bowl weekend, he said. His uncle had won \$200 in roulette and they’d rented a room with a big-screen and split a jug of scotch. Brad said he remembered Rachel by the Jacuzzi, the way she appeared alluring and untouchable and only half-formed through the steam.

That night she let Brad finger her in an alley behind the bakery. His method was sudden and violent—all prodding, no rubbing. Rachel made sounds like she thought would be expected. Finally they quit when a garbage lid clattered on the pavement—a stray cat, probably, or a raccoon. Rachel buttoned her shorts and climbed onto her bike. When Brad said to call him she said she didn’t know his number.

“Call me at work. Two-one-eight—”

“I didn’t say I want your number,” she said, pedaling away with the blanket over her shoulders. “Maybe I’ll see you, maybe I won’t. So long.”

[4]

Though she did see him again. That summer she saw him driving past her team's softball practice with his arm out the window, and then she saw him drive back the other way. She saw him below a streetlight outside the Banana Split, eating fries slathered in ketchup. And one night when she was biking past the lake she saw him sitting on a bench, alone and staring out at the timber cargos as if that was a perfectly natural thing to do.

Rachel had no one to tell about Brad. She and her friends had split up in the manner of teenage girls, and her three older sisters were out of the house. Her dad had long since moved out and her mother sometimes stayed in bed or went mute for days. It was that summer Rachel first felt the dark, nagging feeling—that she was alone in the world, no one to confide in and only herself to trust.

*[Take Me Away]*

Shortly before Labor Day she biked to the Cattle Corral and took a stool at the bar. “I want a Manhattan, please, and after that a gin fizz,” she said. She turned and tried seeing back into the kitchen. The Corral was a homestyle restaurant made to look like an old barn, its walls hung with leather bridles and boot spurs and antique branding irons. Rachel had seen Brad's car outside and knew he was a line cook there. “Is Brad working?” she asked.

The bartender, a brunette woman with braided pigtails and painted-on freckles, filled a glass with ice and poured something clear and bubbly from a hose. “Who?” she

asked, and Rachel explained Brad, dark hair, scruffy face, drives the Mustang—*Brad*, with the scar runs this way down his cheek. “Oh, him,” said the bartender. “I don’t know. Brad? I can go see.”

“Tell him his girlfriend’s at the bar. Hey—” said Rachel, taking a drink through her straw, “this is just Sprite.”

For the next hour she watched a baseball game and played photo hunt on a tabletop video machine. She drank two more Sprites. In time the bartender brought her a plate of chicken fingers and said, “From the kitchen. The guy wants me to say his shift’s almost up. Listen,” the bartender said. “You look like a nice girl, okay? It’s already late. I’ll put these chicken strips in a box, and I can say you got a call and couldn’t stay. Do you understand?”

“Thanks, but I’m not as young as I look,” Rachel said. “I want ranch dressing, please.”

Later she and Brad parked behind the fertilizer plant, where the lamps were all busted and there were no other cars, and weeds grew from the flaking concrete as wide and tall as garden shrubs. Rachel turned in her seat and said, “Can I talk to you?” School was starting next week, she told Brad. This would be her first year at the senior high. She had fears about being trampled in crowds. She wasn’t certain who she was yet. All her sisters had run cross-country, she said, and she thought maybe she could do the same.

Brad didn’t seem to be listening. Finally he chose something heavy and industrial sounding from his CD booklet. He leaned across the center console and put his tongue in Rachel’s mouth.

Everything was awkward in the front seats. Brad’s skin was oily and his hair

smelled like the fryer vats. He put his arms up Rachel's shirt and tried unclasping her bra, then suddenly he reached up and twisted the skin of her neck between his fingernails. She pulled his arms down and moved away. "Will you take me back now?" she said. "I just remembered I have something to do in the morning."

Brad wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I didn't hurt you," he said. "That's how you like it, anyway. You want it to hurt."

"No," Rachel said. "I don't."

[6]

That fall Rachel joined the cross-country team. She started the season on junior varsity, but by the fourth meet she outdueled a sophomore girl and got promoted. Rachel's role was that of supernova: she would charge out at the start of each race, wasting herself in an attempt to wear down the opposing schools' runners. Then at the third mile her three fastest teammates, all seniors, would overtake the pack and sprint home. At most meets the seniors finished one-two-three, and soon Rachel was placing in the top ten herself.

A boy named Darren Hunt took a liking to Rachel. Darren was stringy and long-limbed, his complexion the color of paste. Although he was only an eighth-grader he'd been elected junior varsity captain, and sometimes he sang the stretching cadence and called on Rachel to join in harmony. *Dollface*, he called her. It embarrassed her to no end. Still, she went with Darren and his friends to a movie once, and another time to the homecoming football game, but nothing clicked between them. While Rachel appreciated Darren Hunt, she found him too safe and far too devoted.

The region meet was held that October on a golf course overlooking Lake Superior. Rachel took an early lead. At the second mile marker she saw Darren Hunt running among the coaches and spectators along the fairway, cheering her on. The course looped around a small pond and then crossed over to an adjacent fairway. Darren reappeared loping through the rough grass, and although the other runners were at her heels Rachel flashed him a discreet wave. Then Brad Van Laecken emerged from the trees. He thrust out an arm and clotheslined Darren Hunt, who wasn't even facing forward, and Darren's feet went out and he skidded to the ground.

Rachel blinked hard and shook her head, all in stride. And suddenly her own legs gave out—one knee simply buckled and she rolled over herself onto the grass. Several runners dodged her and jostled for the lead. Her teammates sprinted past, shouting, “Rachel, get up!” She glanced back to where two adults in orange vests were speaking calmly to Darren, their hands on his shoulders to keep him from trying to stand.

[7]

Two weeks later she was walking from school when Brad idled up along the curb. It had turned cold suddenly. The days had shortened and chimney smoke filled the low sky with mesquite. When Brad cranked down his window a burst of wavy heat escaped the car.

“Get in,” he said.

“Are you nuts? Keep driving. Who are you, even?”

“I'll give you a ride. You're really gonna walk up to the Heights in this cold?”

Rachel stopped. She hugged her arms over her chest.

“How do you know where I live?”

A light mist had begun. Brad revved the engine, inching the car forward. On the wheel his hands were chapped and broken at the knuckles.

“Just get in,” he told her. “I’m letting out all the heat.”

[8]

They rode through the park district and into the residential blocks. At a four-way stop Brad reached over and turned off the stereo. “Your house is up to the left,” he said. “But right now I have a different idea.”

With the gearbox in neutral, he let the car roll slowly backward. Then he shifted into first and turned back toward the lake.

“Stop it,” Rachel said. “Brad, turn around. Let me out.”

But he kept driving, rolling through stop signs and traffic lights, beyond the school and the canal and onto a two-lane highway leading north out of the city. The road wound past lake resorts and thick maple forests. They drove into a freezing rain and the windows fogged up from the inside. Brad took her phone and tucked it in his jacket. The wipers dragged across the windshield and Rachel thought of opening her door and leaping out, but she knew she would only be left worse with no one to help.

Brad turned west onto a county road with no shoulder. “I don’t mean to harm you,” he said. “I wanted to take you home, I swear it. But I get this yellow light that covers my insides, and the light expands in me and tugs me like I’m bound by ropes. You can’t tease me, Rachel. I was going to take you home. Don’t tease me anymore, okay? Be a good girl. Don’t come around at night and climb my walls or float on my ceiling—I see

the way you look at me. Don't cry, Rachel. We're safe. The yellow light is driving now."

On either side of the road were deep weedy ditches. The highway rose over a bluff, flattened out between fields of chaff. "Brad, slow down," Rachel said.

"Listen here, you little tease." He faced Rachel, his eyes dark and intense. "I'll lift you up with the yellow light. The way I see us, we're already in the air."

He spun the wheel. The tires hissed and Rachel rocked against the passenger door. She closed her eyes and braced her hands against the dash, and below them the pavement turned to gravel and the car shimmied, fishtailing along the rocks, and then it steadied. Rachel looked to see they were now riding south. The light of day had sunk behind the hills out her window.

"We're almost there," Brad said.

"Where?"

"We're almost home."

Soon they pulled onto a rutted path enclosed by thick dark trees. A small lake or a fishing reservoir came into view, near which sat an old RV camper raised up on blocks. Brad pulled next to it and killed the ignition. He laid on his horn. It rang out a long time. "This is my Mustang," he told Rachel. "I bought it with money I earned." Then he put the keys in his mouth and left for the camper.

[9]

Rachel stayed in the car. Rain pattered the roof and dimpled the windshield.

The camper door opened and a man stepped out and said something to Brad, but Brad passed him by and went inside. The man wore oil-spotted jeans and two layers of

flannel shirts. He was the same man from the hotel pool. He stood there a while looking out into the night, and then he came down for Rachel.

“Let’s go inside,” he said through the window glass. “Too cold. What’s out here for you? Nothing. So come inside. You can call me Jersey. Look—” He pointed down to his bare feet. “Don’t make me stand out here forever.”

*[Object]*

“You’re Rachel,” said Jersey, drying his hair and face with a ragged kitchen towel. “What’s this about you floating on the ceiling?”

It was warm in the camper. A small space heater hummed between the seats up front. Against one wall was a sagging yellow sofa, and opposite that was a fold-out dining table. There were magazines, empty cans, small bits of machinery smeared in grease. One doorway looked into a small, darkened bathroom. The door to another room was shut, thin light glowing around its edges.

“I don’t know what that means,” Rachel said.

Jersey narrowed his eyes at her. His face was gray and gaunt and cracked like leather. “Brad told me about your pussy,” he said. “He described it for me.” He breathed through his nose. “I know you’re scared, Rachel. You don’t have to be scared.”

“I don’t know where I am.”

“You’re in my home. They call this the Cloquet Valley,” Jersey said, draping the towel over a sink in the kitchenette. “You’ve probably heard of the Cloquet River, but that’s south of here. We’re in the uplands. They used to cull this land for timber, but not anymore.”



“Brad has my phone. It’s in his jacket.”

“Right now Brad needs to rest.”

“Is that his room? If he goes to sleep, will you take me home?”

“No,” Jersey said. “If you’re cold you can have a blanket.” He took a seat on the sofa. “Are you hungry, Rachel? You must be hungry. You see that hotplate on the countertop?” he asked. “Yes, that. Now open the cupboard and take down two cans of soup.”

Rachel did what he asked.

“There’s an iron pot in the cabinet by the floor,” Jersey said. “Do you need me to keep giving directions? I’m going to stop talking now and just watch.”

[11]

That night Rachel prepared dinner—toast and vegetable soup. She sat at the table while Jersey ate on the sofa. He ate slowly. He watched her as he ate. Soon the night grew calm, the only sound rainwater dripping from the leaves outside. Rachel felt uncomfortable but not imperiled, and the idea of running only seemed like an escape into something worse, and so she filled the silence by talking.

She told what Brad had done at the region cross-country meet and Jersey said he knew. It still affected Rachel, and her voice wavered. She said how things might have changed if she’d gone to state as a freshman. All honors aside, she could have been somebody at school, she could have stood out among the crowds, and it would have meant the world to her sisters. Her sisters were so much older than her, she told Jersey. They were from Rachel’s mother’s first marriage. Their father had died before Rachel

was born, and Rachel's own father had left early and she never learned why and sometimes felt like she'd been to blame. Her mother now was distant, medicated and cheerless. And Rachel wanted to be tough, she said, she wanted to take care of herself, but home to her was like a halfway house and freshman year was like a traffic jam, and even now, in early November, she knew they were in for a long and unforgiving winter.

Jersey had been listening in a stolid, clinical way. Now he reached out between them and snapped his fingers like a battery of firecrackers. "Your life is not remarkable," he said with surprising calm. "You'll find a lot of people with the same problems."

Rachel wiped her nose on the back of her hand.

"Okay," she said.

"I'm going to sleep now. I'm sorry we don't have a guest bed. The floor is clean and there's a blanket." He stood and pulled the chain on an overhead bulb. The cabin went dark but for the glowing coils of the space heater.

*[The Rift]*

The next morning Rachel was wearing different clothes—a creamy sweater and a floor-sweeping housedress, flesh-colored nylons and soft leather flats. The clothes were worn thin and smelled of mothballs. They weren't Rachel's clothes. She didn't recall changing into them. Yet she liked the way they felt, feathery and warm, and as she stood and looked out the windshield their strangeness passed from her mind like mist through a screen.

Perhaps fifty yards out, the lake appeared like an amphitheater among the white birch and evergreen trees. It moved in small waves, glinting in the low sun. The near

shore was lined with reeds and scattered boulders, and among them was an old, mildew-stained boat, its registration numbers faded along the bow. Brad was out in the woods by himself, while Jersey had gone off somewhere in the car. Rachel knew this without having to be told.

Before long she got a message that she was meant to clean the inside of the camper. She mixed bleach powder with water from a cloudy jug, and using a steel-wool pad scoured grime from every surface, from the driver's cabin to Brad's bedroom in the rear. His bedroom wasn't that different from any other teenage boy's—posters of sports cars and beer models in bikinis, plastic freeweights in the corner, cologne and loose change on the dresser. Rachel cleaned until her fingertips wrinkled. She cleaned until the inside of her nose burned with the bleach solution. The camper had taken on mud and oil and lint, thistles and animal fur, pebbles, dried leaves and pine sap—all of which she stuffed into plastic grocery sacks and tied up at the handles. Nothing should remain, she knew.

[13]

Around dusk she went outside and set the garbage sacks at the front of the camper. Jersey and Brad were there. All afternoon they'd been working under the hood. At present Jersey had an arm down in the engine, ratcheting something with a socket wrench, and Brad was beside him with a penlight.

"It's cold out here," Rachel said, pulling her sleeves down over her hands. "Do you ever go fishing in that lake?"

"All the time," Jersey said. "Lots of sturgeon and largemouth."

“Couple weeks ago I caught a northern pike this big,” Brad said, measuring his elbow to his fingertips.

“Bigger than that,” Jersey said. “Bradley, start it up.”

Brad went inside and tried the ignition. The engine clicked but wouldn’t start. Jersey waved to hold off while he finessed something deep down in the engine block. The next time the starter roared, but then something misfired and the ignition went back to clicking.

Jersey opened a folding knife and leaned in and cut something loose. “Timing belt’s shredded,” he said, holding the penlight to it. “Fucks up everything.” He flung it over with the trash.

“What’s the timing belt do?” Rachel said.

Jersey let down the prop and settled the hood. He turned the light onto Rachel. Then he led her away from the camper to a knee-high stump, where she pulled the dress behind her knees and sat.

“I don’t like this uneven color,” Jersey said, putting a hand through her hair. “Keep still.” Rachel saw the blade of the knife, long and hooked like a scythe. It reflected orange in the dusky light. She wasn’t scared, though. She knew this wasn’t meant to hurt. Jersey twisted her hair and pulled it taut, then sawed through it and scattered it in the spotty grass.

A frigid breeze swept over them from the lake. Brad, by then, had come back outside. “I was acting bad yesterday,” he said to Rachel. “I won’t do that again.” Jersey brushed the loose hair from her neck. Surprisingly his hand was very warm.

“What’s this for?” Rachel asked.

“I don’t understand the question,” Jersey said. He stepped back and looked her over. “Hold on, that looks like shit.” He held her chin up and took off more around her ears. Finally he wiped the blade on his pant leg and straightened Rachel’s collar. “There. How’s it feel?”

“It’s different,” she said.

*[Captain]*

That second morning Rachel and Jersey went out in the boat. It was a flat-bottom jack boat as plain as a saucer. Before they shoved out Jersey took off his boots and stripped down to his briefs. “It’ll be cold,” he told Rachel. He was pale white and thin without his clothes, stringy, his ribs like digits. Rachel too got down to her sports bra and underwear. She sat up front on a thwart while Jersey kneeled in the back with an oar.

The boat rode low in the water. On the floor were perhaps a dozen rocks, some as large as loaves of bread. Jersey explained how this was a glacial lake, connected to other lakes and fed by underground springs. That’s how the water stayed so clear. He told Rachel to look over the gunwale, where ten feet down was a school of sterling perch.

At the center of the lake he set down the oar. “This is when it gets cold,” he said. With a spool of fishing line he tied the butt end of his oar to a rock. He slid them into the water, where they sank down quickly out of view. “We were never here.” He hoisted another rock and slammed it down through fiberglass floor. Water spewed up like from a burst pipe. Jersey stood, the water already at his ankles, and dove out into the lake. Rachel followed. She looked back only seconds later to see the boat as a sinking form beneath the surface, and then it was gone.

The rest of the day she stayed inside by the space heater. Outside the sky was gray and cloudless. Jersey and Brad worked in stocking caps and cowhide gloves. By afternoon they had the engine running, and Brad took to removing each wheel with a four-way lug wrench. Together they plugged the tires, but without an air compressor Brad had to fill each one with a small pump like that from a gymnasium. At sundown he called for Rachel to come outside.

He took her around the camper shining a flashlight over the wheels and engine block, and he reached into an electrical panel and switched some wires, illuminating the side of the cabin with orange running lights. A two-wheeled trailer was hitched to the rear—a tow dolly, Brad explained, for the Mustang.

“I don’t care about any of this,” Rachel said. “Where’s Jersey?”

“My uncle’s building a fire down by the water. Aren’t you proud of me, Rachel?”

“I just said, I don’t care. Take it or leave it, fine with me.” She pulled the blanket tighter around her shoulders. “You have the flashlight. Lead the way.”

Jersey was lighting the kindling when they arrived by the water. The logs were stacked like a cabin, and soon the flames curled up and ignited the four sides. Jersey dropped a sack of garbage into the fire. It burned green and pink, scraps of paper, magazines and food wrappers. Flakes of ash floated up like fireflies in the night. The wood rustled and hissed.

“Should we sing a song?” Jersey said.

Rachel looked up at him. “That’s a really weird thing to say right now.”

“I like Bob Seger.”

“So weird,” Rachel said. “I don’t even know who that is.”

“You’d recognize his songs.”

“‘Night Moves,’” said Brad.

Jersey put in another sack, then another. Rachel saw her jeans and sweater in the flames, her school backpack. What remained shrunk to a hard black mass. In time the fire waned. Small embers tumbled down into the coals. Rachel rubbed her eyes, which stung from the smoke. “I’m over this,” she said. “Take me back so I can sleep.”

*[Light Me Up]*

Rachel’s third morning would be their last in the woods. She wouldn’t remember waking up on the floor of the camper, but only sitting again on the stump at dawn, her breath making clouds in the early light. Brad was there with a length of twine, which he fastened around her neck in the style of a halter. “Work’s almost done,” he said, leading her out into the trees.

Together they collected a series of spring-loaded rabbit traps. The traps were placed among root systems and at the edge of tall grasses. Some were closed already, and those that weren’t Brad set off by stabbing a twig between their teeth. He seemed to know his way by instinct, though Rachel stumbled over roots and snagged the tether on low-hanging branches, and when she strayed it tightened and she would gasp for air. Only one trap contained a rabbit, its ankle snapped and the white of its bone exposed.

Brad unstaked each trap—in total, a half-dozen—and had Rachel tote them by their chains. Finally he told her to drop them in a pile outside the camper. “Me and you’ll

clean these traps,” Brad said, untying the halter. “I’ll skin the rabbit, you don’t have to do that. And then say good-bye to all this.”

“Good-bye to all this,” Rachel said.

But something happened as she assessed the steel traps. She saw a reflection she didn’t recognize—boyish hair and sallow face, her clothing worn and grimy. It was her mother, she thought at first, only to then realize the reflection was in fact her own. The image warped in the curve of the metal and its mouth dropped open, calling out to Rachel in the language of a wild animal, a rabid squall, and all the other noise in her mind went silent.

[17]

Soon after that she escaped. Her escape was quick. It had to be.

Back in the camper she fixed the men their coffee, and when she brought it from the kitchenette she put her hand on Jersey’s, lacing their fingers together. It was an odd gesture, her first time doing so. Jersey shook her away, but she’d seen the blood rise in Brad’s cheeks. She moved closer to Jersey. She pressed her hip into his shoulder and ran her fingers through his hair. “Stop it,” he said. “Keep to yourself.”

Rachel lifted the blouse from her shoulders. “Touch me like you did last night,” she said. “I want Brad to watch.”

Brad swiftly yanked away a leg of Jersey’s chair. The two of them dropped to the floor. Brad took the top and pummeled Jersey in the ribs. They grappled and turned one another, hitting the table and spilling coffee across the floor. Jersey shucked Brad and got to his knees, but Brad pounced again and landed an elbow in Jersey’s kidney.



“Stop!” Rachel shouted.

Brad looked up. She swung the hot plate into the side of his face. He rolled down to the floor, unmoving.

“You little cunt,” Jersey said.

“He was hurting you,” Rachel said. “Stay back, please.”

She shoved the hot plate but Jersey deflected it with an open hand. “Rachel, you fucked up,” he said, climbing to his feet. “Get on the floor.”

He unclipped the folding knife from his belt. She reached back and pried the top off the canister of bleach, then scattered it forward. When Jersey lunged out she batted his wrist and the knife went loose. He was coughing on the floor, brushing at his eyes. And in that moment Rachel fished the keys from Brad’s pocket and ran outside to the Mustang.

The car was a manual transmission. Rachel mashed the pedals and hammered the gears, and though she started it once it soon shuddered and died. She tried the ignition again, dropped the clutch and slammed the gas, and the car jolted ahead into the side of the camper, folding back the hood of the car and blooming its windshield in a spiderweb pattern.

She got out. There she saw Jersey throwing his shoulder into the camper door, which was now pinned shut. “I’m sorry,” she said, “I’m so sorry.” He put his elbow through the window glass, though it had no effect. And although Rachel’s vision was blurry and her knees were weak, she knew to run up the rutted trail to a county road, and from there to keep running, until half a mile later she stopped at a crossroad and flagged the first truck to pass.

*[Transitions]*

That winter Rachel moved in with her oldest sister down in St. Paul. The sister, Bethany, was twenty-eight and recently divorced. Her married name had been Briggs, and a social worker suggested Rachel adopt Briggs as well for the sake of anonymity.

For several months Bethany took Rachel with her to separation support groups held in community halls and church basements. These rooms were always dimly lit and smelled of mildew, with dry cookies and too-strong coffee. And the women were sad, victimized, shattered in ways that resisted healing. To them, redemption seemed foggy and beyond reach. Soon Bethany recognized the error of exposing Rachel to such a culture.

“We should go to a basketball game instead,” she said one night as they were putting on their coats to leave the apartment. “Probably I’ve gotten all I can from those meetings.”

“I have homework,” Rachel said. “Can we afford tickets, anyway?”

“It’s easy to scalp. Bring your homework. You realize you’re my best friend,” Bethany said. “I don’t want to sit around inside my own head either.”

*[Did You See Me?]*

That May the state track meet was held on one of the college campuses there in city. Rachel had qualified for the 3,200-meter run, and as it happened she was placed in a heat with one of the seniors from her old school. The senior looked at her oddly at first, as if Rachel’s was a face familiar yet altogether changed. “Rachel?” the senior said.

“Your hair’s so short. Where have you been?” But then they were made to take their lanes, and the race began.

Rachel stayed up front until the seventh lap. Then on the curve she sensed her old teammate behind her. And right then Rachel was taken with what she could only describe later as a vast and glowing yellow heat. It seemed to press in from her peripheral vision, blurring the stands and the lane markers and the infield grass. She felt herself swept upward, lifted over the track. The fact of inertia brought her to a halt. Ahead, the scoreboard timer had frozen. A nearby pole vaulter had stopped with his pole in a perfect arc. Rachel blinked. “Keep still,” she heard. And then a ripple swept across her vision like a dam had burst, she came back down and the race continued. She regained her momentum and careened out into an middle lane, where she caught a spike on the track and tumbled to the ground.

By the time she got to her feet most everyone had passed her. Her shin was scraped, blood collecting in her sock. Before anyone could stop her she moved back to the inside lane and kept running, now well out of contention. After the race she allowed two lane-timers to hoist her by the shoulders to the first-aid booth. Her old teammate, she was told, had lost steam in the final 100 meters and drawn up fourth.

[20]

In the summers Bethany taught at a language camp held further south along the river. Rachel joined her as an aide, working one summer in the kitchen and the next hosting conversation circles in French. The days were long—all sunlight, warm air, lush foliage. Boys flirted with Rachel and she flirted back, but when they were alone together

she became flustered and panicky. One night at campfire a boy named Jason Kurtz came up from behind and caressed the back of Rachel's neck, and she turned and shoved him over a wooden bench.

"It just frightened me," she told Bethany later. "Like inside I got all cold, but outside I was burning up. I was sweating, like all of a sudden. I don't even like Jason Kurtz. What right does he have to touch me?"

"He likes you. You don't have to like him back," Bethany said. "But believe me, what he did was innocent."

"You don't have tell me that," Rachel said. She was shaking just talking about it. "Jason and I are friendly—I know he's shy and sincere. I understand it, okay, but I don't want it."

[21]

Rachel Briggs continued running. She grew four more inches by her junior year, and her strides lengthened and she improved her posture. Running wasn't a metaphor. For Rachel, it didn't mean avoidance or escape. Running was just something that called her to the present moment. It changed her chemically, like it untied a knot around her chest and drained the tension through her fingertips and toes, until inside she was pleasantly empty. She won races, too, but the winning never mattered so much as the emptying.

[22]

Jersey died in prison during the spring of Rachel's junior year. He'd been of the

lowest class of inmates, those whose offenses involved minors. One night he'd been stabbed and had bled out before the prison guards found him in the morning. As for his assailant, it wasn't known. It didn't matter. The news came through Bethany, who'd learned in a phone call from their mother. "That means the end of his appeal," Bethany said. "It means the end for everything with that man."

"His name was Jersey," Rachel said. She'd just returned to their apartment after track practice. It was unseasonably warm, and she wore thin polyester shorts and a school t-shirt showing an image of athletic feet with wings.

"You can cry," Bethany said. "Even if you're confused. It's all right."

"I don't need to," Rachel said, filling a glass with filtered water from the fridge. Then she asked what would become of the other man, the nephew. Bethany didn't know. And in truth, Rachel had nearly forgotten Brad Van Laecken, which was close enough, she felt, to forgiving him.

*[Tried and True]*

And Rachel fit in at school—she blended in. She made friends, and she dressed nice, and some weekends she and her girlfriends would go to games or the mall or to outdoor markets in the city center. In the summer before her senior year, she saw Darren Hunt at the state fair, in the grandstand at an evening concert. At a break between songs Darren came and stood beside her at a railing along the bleachers. "How are you?" he said.

"Do I know you?" Rachel said. But of course she knew him. Darren had hardly changed. He was still pale and gangly, though his complexion had cleared up. "Listen, I

can't talk right now," Rachel said. "Those are my friends. It's nothing personal. Don't tell anyone you saw me, okay? I'm someone different now."

"But where did you go?" he asked.

Rachel told Darren it was nice seeing him and that she remembered him fondly, then she slipped away before the band returned for its encore. She took the bus home early, before her curfew. And back home she changed into her shorts and running shoes, and despite Bethany's worries she took to the lighted trails around the city's chain of lakes, as she often did, lithe as a doe, watchful like an owl.

[24]

Fall of her senior year her mother parked in the garage and ran her engine overnight. A neighbor found her two days later. Rachel hadn't been home in three years—time enough that she no longer thought of it as home. But she and Bethany drove up without any ado, and the night before the funeral they walked with their two other sisters around the canal by Lake Superior and went out for pizza. Their server was a blond girl Rachel's own age, and when she came for their drink order she halted and put a finger to her chin.

"Rachel? Is that you? It's me, Helen," she said. "Rachel, it's been ages. What school are you at now? Are these your sisters?" Everyone made their introductions. Helen Voight had grown into a woman, bright and cheery and self-assured. "I sure miss you, Rachel," she said. "I feel like I haven't seen you since... It was the Fourth of July... there was that older boy. Do you remember?"

"I do remember," Rachel said.

“Who’s this older boy, Rachel?” said one of her sisters. “See, Helen, Rachel doesn’t tell us about her boyfriends.”

“Helen, did you know I used to be a restaurant server, too?” Bethany said quite abruptly. “You don’t know the place. It was a sandwich shop down the road, but it’s gone now.”

Then the sisters got to talking about places in town that no longer existed, the empty buildings and unfamiliar storefronts, and Helen left to put in their orders, and Rachel smiled and nodded and kept good company, and later she and Helen hugged and promised to find one another online although Rachel knew they’d forget that promise before the night even ended.

*[Even if You Don’t]*

That Christmas Bethany’s boyfriend invited her and Rachel to spend the holiday with his family. They gathered at a wide, three-story house in one of the affluent suburbs. The family’s foyer was open and airy, and the Christmas tree rose up beside the staircase with glistening ornaments and strings of garland. Dinner was goose, parsley and potatoes, a dozen other things. Later the boyfriend’s father played the piano and the mother stood beside him singing carols, something Rachel would only have imagined in a holiday movie.

Things would change, she knew. It was evident in the way Bethany’s boyfriend treated her, as if Bethany was already part of the family. And Rachel was eighteen now, old enough to be in the world on her own.

Later that night they were sitting around the den when Bethany’s boyfriend

produced a small gift from his jacket pocket. He tossed it across the room to Rachel.

“From all of us,” he said. “Open it.”

Rachel undid the bow and peeled back the paper. She held out a small jeweler’s box. “Well, look inside,” Bethany said. Rachel unfurled a gold necklace with an anchor pendant. “Oh, come on, Rachel,” Bethany said. “Don’t cry. It’s just a small gift. Say thank you.”

“I wasn’t going to cry,” Rachel said. And she laughed to show how far from tears she actually was. “You were just teasing, I know. Thank you.” She held up the necklace for everyone to see. Holiday bulbs reflected off the tines of the anchor. Put it on, the family urged her. But she pretended not to hear. “It really is pretty,” she said. “I’ll carry it with me, okay?”



## MAKE IT YOURS

Maguire starts telling a story to the men in the truck. The story is about an old concrete worker named LaPointe. It's raining outside, and that's why the men are in the truck. They are concrete workers themselves, state employees who attend to highway bridges.

LaPointe was a Pine Ridge Indian who'd been full-time with Maguire seven or eight years earlier. One morning they were on a bridge down by Castlewood, where a runoff berm had cracked and diverted rainfall out over the soil embankment. Over time, the rainfall had washed out a gully large enough for a man to lie down in and go to sleep, if he so wanted.

The berm was a simple repair. Maguire and LaPointe knocked out the bad concrete with a jackhammer, drilled anchors and built a plywood form, mixed two bags of quick-setting concrete and shaped the new berm with trowels. As for the gully, Maguire left LaPointe on the bridge and drove back to the county shop for asphalt millings to use as fill.

But on the drive it started raining—it started pouring—blurring the lines on the road even with the wipers at their highest speed. The rain, Maguire knew, would compromise the newly poured concrete, and it would clog up the jackhammers and the air compressor, which had been left sitting in the closed-off lane of highway. These were only minor problems, as Maguire explains to the men in the truck. He and LaPointe could reshape the berm, and the tools would dry out. But then Maguire got to thinking about LaPointe alone back there in the rain. He turned around in a farmer's approach and returned to the bridge.

Let me guess, interrupts Barnett. You had a tarp for the air compressor. And you found the Indian hiding underneath the tarp.

Barnett is the other full-timer. He sits shotgun spitting sunflower shells into a Styrofoam cup. In the back seat are the two seasonal employees, Dunn and Jim Gates. Dunn, now in his third summer on the bridge crew, has a newspaper folded to the crossword puzzle on his lap. Jim Gates, who is only 18 and new to the job, leans forward to hear Maguire through the patter of the rain. At present the men are on the shoulder of a two-lane bridge over the narrow James River, hemmed in by orange traffic barrels.

LaPointe wasn't under the tarp, Maguire says. Dunn, you got a guess?

Climbed down the embankment and taken cover under the bridge.

You boys lack imagination, Maguire says. And I guess you never knew LaPointe.

To know LaPointe was to know the state's laziest worker. Yet LaPointe wasn't dumb. He knew the concrete berm hadn't cured, and the runoff would wash it out before the storm even passed. It would piss away his and Maguire's work, and they'd need to come back tomorrow and again close down a lane of traffic, hammer out the bad concrete and start over from scratch.

So LaPointe worked out a solution. He draped his orange windbreaker over the new concrete and then sat his ass in the gutter of the bridge deck, damming up the runoff and diverting it down his leg toward a nearby drainage grate. When Maguire returned he found LaPointe stripped down to his underwear, exposed to the rain, reclining with his arms stretched out against the guardrail.

Once the storm passed, Maguire climbed down from the truck, and LaPointe stood and wrung out his hair and refastened his ponytail. They lifted the windbreaker to

find the new berm dry as a drought, perfectly formed. A grain truck rode slowly over the bridge, its driver gaping at Maguire and the half-naked Indian.

You didn't get the asphalt millings, LaPointe says to me. Now what are we supposed to do? And I say finding him dry clothes might be the more pressing matter. His jeans and shirt were heaped on the ground, you see? And LaPointe goes, You're right, I can't work like this. Go get the millings, Maguire, he says, and I'll lay low while my clothes dry out in the sun. Which was his scheme all along, just his trick to get me on the shovel.

Barnett chuckles from his seat up front. Dunn pencils in a few squares on his crossword. It's still raining outside, and out beyond the bridge a crow swoops crookedly to a fence post, catches an odd gust and flies off again before it can land.

Jim Gates asks, So what. Was the Indian okay?

Was LaPointe okay? Maguire repeats. Couldn't have been better. If he got sick and missed a couple days work, he was all the happier for it. Hell, LaPointe would just as soon do a rain dance if it meant we could sit our asses all day in the truck.

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Weeks later the men have moved west to the bridges over Snake Creek. It's late June, hot and dry, and the men's arms have browned and their lime-green shirts have bleached in the sun.

The bridges here suffer a number of small structural problems. One day the men might swap out plywood spacers between guardrails, and the next they might drill drainage holes through the concrete decks. On one occasion they use an air compressor to blow out sparrow nests from the steel support beams. Most often, though, they repair

spalled concrete. Concrete goes bad through a process called delamination, in which water intrudes into the road bed and rusts out the steel rebar. Repairing it requires setting signs and blocking off a lane of traffic, hammering out the rotten concrete, sandblasting the rust and then pouring new concrete directly into the road bed.

They are not a hard-working crew. They take breaks often. One morning around ten they set down their tools, and Barnett smokes in the truck while Dunn goes down into the ditch to piss, and Maguire retrieves a bottle of water and then he and Jim Gates lean against the guardrail over the stagnant brown creek. Out in a pasture are forty cattle all wearing yellow tags in their ears. There's a breeze in the air, which carries the scent of earth and manure.

Maguire begins another story about LaPointe.

It's a long story, he says to Jim. Me and LaPointe were best friends—you get that way when you're on the road forty hours a week with someone. But he was an odd one, Maguire says. I can't say I ever understood the man.

LaPointe had a house with his brother and his brother's wife and their two daughters. This was in Groton, a one-stoplight town, as Maguire explains it. And because LaPointe had no car, Maguire would pick him up on the highway each morning before work and drop him off there again each night.

LaPointe didn't drink, and he was the only one in his family who worked. The home situation was volatile—fights, illness, debt. Maguire recalls one story of LaPointe's sister-in-law throwing a cinder block through the storm door and flattening the youngest daughter's thumb. Another time LaPointe's brother shocked his skin black climbing a street pole to siphon electricity from their neighbor. Some nights it wasn't safe LaPointe

being there, and to get away he took to walking the streets after dark.

Groton, at night, might as well board up its windows and declare itself a ghost town, LaPointe had once told Maguire. Trucks sat cooling in gravel driveways, and woodsmoke drifted from one corner of town to the other. Every so often LaPointe would see a church-group concert at the bandshell or a baseball game at the Legion field, but otherwise Groton was just an old public pool and a rusted-out playground, a few dirty bars and a four-lane bowling alley that opened only on the weekends.

At night LaPointe would cross every street and avenue, passing below arclights and the yellow circles they cast onto the pavement, finding himself empty of thought, meditative, coasting like a wagon angled down a gentle slope. One late-summer night he came to attention to see a married couple through the large picture window of their living room.

The couple was young, perhaps in their thirties. The woman looked underfed, pale, though her face and arms were brick-red with freckles. At first it seemed she was dancing. She stood against a wall, motionless through the torso, sweeping her hands and signaling, as if she was tying knots on an imaginary board. The husband sat on a nearby recliner. He wore a baseball cap even though they were indoors. At intervals he mimicked the woman's hand motions, repeating them or adding gestures of his own.

Probably sign language, Jim Gates says.

No shit it was sign language, Maguire says. He leans over the guardrail and spits down into the creek. Any idiot could tell it was sign language, he says.

The woman was the deaf one, LaPointe figured out. She was more articulate, more precise. She might hook two fingers like links in a chain, brush her palm with the

motion of a pendulum, spin her fist as if she was reeling in a fishing line. She was like a third-base coach—that was the only reference LaPointe had. Her signals meant nothing to him, of course, but it didn't truly matter what she was saying. Her hands moved with rhythm and grace, choreography. It was like music to LaPointe.

In time the woman looked out, and maybe she was frightened by the Indian in the street, or maybe she only saw her own reflection, and she came to the window and pulled the drapes shut.

LaPointe returned. He made a habit of it. Soon he quit watching from the street and moved to the corner of the couple's yard, where he took cover in the branches of an old-growth blackjack pine. The tree smelled of Christmas and its bark scattered the ground like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. One night a teenage girl walked by with her golden retriever, and when the dog didn't so much as sniff in LaPointe's direction he knew in that tree he was as good as invisible.

The couple didn't always have conversations. Some nights LaPointe might be lucky to even glimpse the woman passing across the window. Or the man might sit in his recliner two hours at a time, listening to the television and doing something at a small wooden table, cutting or stitching pieces of leather. Sometimes the drapes would remain shut the entire night. Other windows would light up and go dark—the kitchen, the bedroom, a mud room or a laundry room. When this happened, LaPointe would sit at the base of the tree, cloaked in its piney branches, eating pretzels and smoking Newports, attempting stories through hand gestures he invented on his own.

But some nights the couple might sign to one another for thirty minutes straight. These were the nights that kept LaPointe in the tree, like a drug for which he needed a

fix. Observing the woman, it dulled LaPointe's anxieties. It wasn't a sexual attraction. Instead, he felt a sense of communion, a sense of oneness, as if the woman's spirit was revealed in the rush of her hands, the roll of her shoulders, the focus in her eyes. Even without understanding the woman, LaPointe found he could anticipate her next movement.

Two or three weeks passed in this manner. Finally LaPointe told Maguire about the deaf house. They were between bridges in the truck, and LaPointe described his first sighting from the street, the elegance of the woman's gestures, the young girl and her dog, the relief he felt having a place his own. He promised Maguire he meant no harm. And then he explained what he'd seen one night earlier from his place in the pine tree.

That night the woman and her husband were arguing. As LaPointe described it they were shouting—signing more rapidly, interrupting one another with short, forceful movements. Finally the woman made a gesture like a knife being twisted. She stormed out of view and the husband followed, yelling at her behind her back.

Moments later the door opened on the garage. The woman came out into the front lawn. She wore a sleeveless blouse and crossed her arms for warmth, looked up at the cloudless, starry sky. She stood not twenty feet from LaPointe in the pine tree, and in the moonlight he could make out the constellation of her freckles.

And then the man appeared in the driveway behind her. He began apologizing, talking to the woman although her back was turned. He spoke a good couple minutes—a long time—and LaPointe heard everything. The husband was sorry, he said, he was slime, he wanted more in life and at times he felt trapped and he wanted her, his wife, to have more—more security, more opportunity, more happiness every day. He kept talking.

Finally the woman turned and, upon seeing her husband, gave a start. He made three careful motions: an extended little finger, a thumb to his lips, a fist on his chest. *I am sorry*, LaPointe knew.

Sorry for what? asks Jim Gates.

Maguire drinks the last of his water and pitches the bottle down into the creek. The sun is bright, blinding even, and he shields his eyes to look out into the pasture. Then he takes his leather gloves from his back pocket, calls for Barnett and Dunn, and the men go back to work.

\*

After Labor Day the region shop hosted its annual surplus auction, where it sold decommissioned cars and old skid steer attachments, bales of wire, power tools and hand tools, bulky metal desks, phone systems and the like. Maguire and LaPointe were enlisted, along with workers from the paint and sign crews, to take down bids and move equipment when it came off the auction block. Not everything sold. The leftover items were dumped on a flatbed trailer to be hauled to the Salvation Army, and from that pile LaPointe plucked off an old cream-colored electric typewriter.

Maguire tells this part of the story weeks after the men have moved on from the Snake Creek bridges. By now they're further south, on the interstate, where the traffic is more frequent and much faster. One day recently, Jim Gates edged too far toward the open lane and had his cap blown off by a passing semi-trailer.

Maguire tells the story in fragments, an incident here and another there. He doesn't bother with it when Barnett and Dunn are around. They'd never understand it, he tells Jim Gates.



LaPointe's typewriter, when it was plugged in, rattled like a diesel engine. He ran a test page to find that some letters managed only inarticulate blotches. After the auction the seasonals had been cut and the full-timers lingered around the shop preparing for plow season. These days LaPointe would retreat to one of the outbuildings, where he hunched over a workbench cleaning and repairing the typewriter.

The work was tedious and on a miniature scale. First he unscrewed the faceplate, pried off the gunked-up letter faces and soaked them in gasoline. After that he went at the interior with cotton swabs and a wire brush. To silence the rattling, he bent the harness brackets with a vise grip and busted off toothpick ends, which served like tiny shims, between the brackets and the typewriter carriage. He scrubbed the exterior with hot soapy water, and, as the last step, polished the wood inlay with linseed oil. Finally one afternoon he unveiled the typewriter to Maguire.

Big fuckin deal, I say to him. Looks pristine, but it's still a goddamn typewriter, Maguire says. I tell him he'll be lucky to get ten bucks for it, and LaPointe goes he's not trying to sell it. The typewriter's not for him, he tells me.

Soon after, LaPointe wrapped the typewriter in a scrap of green tarpaulin and took it home to Groton. At this point of the story, Maguire is forced to speculate. His guess, he says, is that LaPointe took it straight to the pine tree—why else would he cover it with the tarp? But being an electric typewriter, it was no more useful than a rock if it wasn't plugged in.

So it was for the deaf woman, says Jim.

Or her husband, Maguire says. Or both. I don't know LaPointe had thought things through completely.

A week passes before Maguire resumes the story. The men move to another bridge which crosses a defunct rail line overgrown with knapweed and aster. It's mid-summer now and it hasn't rained in weeks. The wind blows the wheatgrass flat along the ditches, and concrete dust whirls in the air, clinging to the men's sweat and coating them like ghosts.

So I ask LaPointe about the typewriter, Maguire says one morning while he and Jim Gates are stacking bags of pea gravel onto the supply trailer. He's been acting dumb and sullen ever since taking it from the shop. But he needs to talk, I can tell.

LaPointe indeed wanted to make a gift of the typewriter, he told Maguire. He knew it was old and mostly worthless, but he wanted the deaf woman and her husband to have it. His rationale was simple: it would fill the gaps of their failed communication. So one night after the house went dark, he left it outside the door of the couple's garage.

But the next night the typewriter had appeared by the curb like a piece of garbage. LaPointe smuggled it back into the tree, waited, and again set it outside the couple's garage, only to find it the next night returned once more to the curb.

So LaPointe sits tight with it a few nights, Maguire says. He tells me he needs to get that typewriter in the couple's hands. They'll know what to do with it, he says. I tell you, Gates, he was obsessed. You'd say his name five times before he'd hear you. He'd meet me on the highway each morning with needles in his hair and pine sap on his sweatshirt.

Finally LaPointe sketched a new plan of action. He stole an ink ribbon and a ream of paper from the department supply closet, and he snatched a wicker basket from someone's porch. Back at his and his family's house, he typed a note—just a few

anonymous sentences—explaining the gift. And then he returned to the pine tree with the idea to leave the basket on the couple’s front steps, ring the doorbell and hurry away, after that leaving the woman and her husband alone for good.

At this point Maguire abandons the story. He has chances to continue—down time between bridges, long breaks as the men wait for concrete to cure—but he leaves the story dormant. Jim Gates never asks. He senses sleeplessness under Maguire’s eyes, fatigue weighing down on his shoulders.

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That August, Jim Gates takes his turn with LaPointe’s story. One Saturday he and his girlfriend, Marcy May, take a green Wenonah canoe out on the Elm, a narrow, winding river colored brown with the sediment of farm runoff. Jim starts with the scene of LaPointe waking as if from a dream outside the window to the deaf couple’s house. He explains LaPointe’s joy watching her sign so fluently. And to absolve LaPointe, Jim claims he’d fallen into the tree on accident, and that he’d never intended to intrude on the couple’s privacy.

Marcy May is a stern young woman. She wears thick glasses with flip-up shades and leaves no skin exposed for fear of sunburn. When Jim narrates the girl and her golden retriever walking past the tree, Marcy May interrupts him. It doesn’t seem like that could happen, she says. Didn’t you say he was smoking cigarettes? People would smell that.

But the tree was really wide, Jim says. Think of it like a canopy tent. Or like a fortress, even. When Marcy May shakes her head, he says, I’m just telling you what Maguire told me.

Well, who told Maguire?

LaPointe did.

So LaPointe tells Maguire, Maguire tells you, and now you're telling me. Don't you think somewhere along the line things could get confused?

Get confused? Jim says. No. You don't know Maguire, okay? He's got no reason to lie.

Marcy May allows him to continue. He tells the story up to LaPointe waiting at night with the basket in the tree. But then he stalls. He doesn't know what comes next, he has a feeling it's not happy, and he sweeps his oar in the water and they continue down the river. Their canoe passes under electrical wires strung out by transmission pylons, which crackle with the sound of a bug zapper in high heat.

\*

In time the men move north, up to the James River bridges where they'd started the summer. By now it's harvest season. Combines dredge the fields, leaving golden corn stubble in rows along the soil.

The work, which had never seemed urgent, seems even less so now. The men sweep gravel off the bridge deck and seal expansion joints with caulk, simple jobs that don't even require closing a lane of traffic. In a down moment, Jim Gates asks Barnett why LaPointe quit the bridge crew.

LaPointe *quit*? Barnett says. He didn't quit. Do you mean...

Did he get fired? Jim asks.

He didn't get fired. You don't know the story, do you? Barnett says. LaPointe's dead.

What? Jim asks. How?

Barnett pulls up his shirt and wipes the sweat from his chin. His stomach is loose and as white as kitchen flour. I don't know why Maguire keeps telling this story, he says. He'll never get inside that Indian's head.

Yet Jim doesn't press the issue. He waits on Maguire, but Maguire keeps his silence. Later, the two of them end up together in the crew cab, returning to the region shop on a Thursday afternoon. It's nearly Labor Day, and as a seasonal employee Jim will soon be cut loose. He asks Maguire to finish the story about LaPointe.

Didn't I finish it already? Maguire says. What was the last part?

He's in the tree with the basket. He typed a note for the couple. So what does LaPointe do next?

Maguire rolls down his window and lets in the air. They're passing through a small glacial valley, pasture land for cattle, swampy water at the side of the road. So LaPointe's in the tree, Maguire says. The drapes are pulled open. It's dark out and LaPointe is waiting for his chance.

The couple had been arguing again that night. This time, their argument took the form of ignoring one another. The husband worked at his small wooden table, and the woman passed through the living room without so much as stopping to signal a word. When she'd leave, the man would shout at her—LaPointe could hear his voice, garbled. Finally the man got up from his recliner, and in this moment LaPointe went for the door.

He was crouched at the front step, his finger on the doorbell, where from this new angle he saw to the other end of the couple's living room. There, the man had pinned the woman against the wall, his forearm across her chest. With his other hand he stuffed a handkerchief-sized piece of leather into her mouth. The woman squirmed, clutching both

her hands around the man's throat. And then, all at once, the man let go and the woman dropped to her knees. He leaned down and rested a hand on her shoulder. When she looked up, he signaled to her, though LaPointe couldn't see what and wouldn't know its meaning anyway. The woman punched up at him and struck him in the chest, and he fell backward onto the carpet. Then she stood and left the living room, and the man went the other way, into the kitchen, and soon returned to his recliner.

Jim waits for Maguire to continue. They pass a semi-truck hauling cattle, its trailer scattering mud and straw on the road behind it.

And? Jim says.

And LaPointe ditched the basket in the tree and went home, Maguire says. The end. The basket might still be there today, who knows.

Bullshit, Jim says. He didn't leave the typewriter in the tree. LaPointe wouldn't do that.

Says who? What do you know about LaPointe, Maguire says.

Tell me the truth.

The couple moved away, Maguire says. And LaPointe moved away, too. For all I know he's back in Pine Ridge. You lose friends when you're an adult, Gates. Me and LaPointe don't talk anymore.

Barnett told me LaPointe died.

Barnett doesn't know shit, Maguire says. Barnett didn't drive eight-thousand miles one summer with LaPointe. And neither did you, Gates. You never heard LaPointe's stories about his menace brother and his drunk sister-in-law and their two helpless kids. You didn't watch him lose thirty pounds in a single month because he

couldn't eat, he was so caught up trying to help that deaf woman and her husband. It's not your story, Gates. You can't choose how it ends.

Jim turns away and looks out the window. He's crying but he refuses to let Maguire see. I don't know what to believe, he says.

Believe what you want. I'm telling you LaPointe gave up and went home.

\*

This much is certain: LaPointe died that night at the deaf house. I knew he would die seven years ago, when I first tried telling this story. It had to be tragic, I believed. I was younger then, more cynical, and I couldn't imagine LaPointe's meddling going unpunished.

But the story was complicated in my mind and I could never get it right. Details about sign language, the mechanics of concrete repair, the creeks and fields and bridges of northeastern South Dakota—they diverted my attention from the characters of "Make It Yours." For a long time I studied a book I found online, Edgar D. Lawrence's *Sign Language Made Simple*. Once, on a Saturday in October, my brother-in-law and I scouted the James, Elm and Maple Rivers, taking more than 200 photographs of the landscape and the undercarriages of bridges. And I even worked two summers on a bridge crew myself, breathing in concrete dust and sweating through my jeans, trying to imagine the world as LaPointe, Maguire and Jim Gates might inhabit it.

In the last seven years I've tried telling this story from each of their perspectives. Each man filtered the story differently, and each story was different from the next. For a while Jim's father, a newspaper journalist, had a role. There was a time when Jim and Marcy May put down a blanket and made love in the shade alongside the Elm River. One

night I had Maguire shoot fireworks at a highway patrolman while hiding in an automotive graveyard, and another night he watched the lights in his ex-wife's farmhouse from a distance, through field binoculars. As for LaPointe, I forced him to loiter outside the bars and the bowling alley in Groton hoping someone would invite him in for a drink, although no one ever did. And once I had him take his nieces into the tree, where they both fell asleep and he had to carry them across town in the first snow of the season. Ultimately these details seemed unimportant, although you can believe them if you like.

Through every iteration, I couldn't imagine LaPointe living to the end. He was always going to die. And for the longest time, he died violently. The deaf woman's husband, to me, was always the wild card—a vicious, erratic man—but when he finally spoke his long apology that night in the front yard, he became more than the simple terror I'd planned him to be.

So here, in the end, is how LaPointe dies. Time and again, as he tells Maguire, he tries leaving the typewriter for the couple at the deaf house. You can imagine how they think it's junk, and how LaPointe's message is lost. Everything Maguire tells Jim Gates is true, even the scene of the man strangling his wife with a piece of leather. That fight, however, happened weeks earlier, one of many that LaPointe witnessed and described to Maguire in the truck.

On the night LaPointe dies the house is in fact quiet, with little interaction between the woman and her husband. LaPointe, by now, has abandoned his idea to leave the wicker basket on the front steps. He's decided he needs to get it inside the house.

Before doing so, he lugs the typewriter to the town park, where he plugs it into an outlet in the bandshell and composes a new letter, explaining how he's watched the



couple from the blackjack pine and the anguish he feels—deep down, in his true heart of hearts—over their failure to connect. The typewriter, he says, is a small gift, which they can use sparingly, in moments when signing isn't enough. Then he returns to the house, and, once the windows are dark and he can be certain the couple is asleep, jimmys the lock on the garage and goes inside.

The drapes are still open, and moonlight paints the corners of the living room. The air is salty with the smell of beef broth or stew. LaPointe carries the basket to the wooden table and rolls his note into the paper feeder of the typewriter. Then he turns to leave and sees the woman in a doorway behind him.

Who are you? she says. Her voice is round and inarticulate, unpracticed. She speaks from her diaphragm, a deep, guttural sound. I live here, she says.

LaPointe indicates the typewriter in the basket. He points to it and then to himself, and he shapes his hands into a heart and holds them over his chest.

Leave, the woman says.

Read the note, LaPointe says, but it doesn't register. He goes toward the woman and takes her hand, intending to guide her toward the typewriter.

The woman screams—loudly, deeply like a tortured moan. She plows into LaPointe and knocks him back on his heels, and he stumbles and tilts backward and cracks his head on the corner of the wooden table. It could be that his neck snaps, or his skull punctures, and he falls to the carpet unmoving, the dark living room fading out into greater darkness.

The husband rushes in from the bedroom. His wife, by then, has slunk down against the wall. He crouches down and takes her by the shoulders. What happened? he

says, What is it? And it takes several attempts until she can explain it with her hands. The husband goes and checks LaPointe's breath. He shakes his head and returns to his wife, waits until she can stand before he goes to the phone and calls the police. The couple doesn't notice LaPointe's letter—not yet—but it becomes, in time, the most legible part of a tragedy that bonds them.

## SAD ELIZABETH

Paul Berlin and Sarah Stetson got fired from their jobs at the radio station. A man named Reggie Evans flew in from the corporate office in Kansas City to deliver the news. Paul and Sarah had alienated KSLO's conservative listening base, he explained. The station had endured complaints, criticism and threats of boycott. In turn, sponsors had pulled their support. "It's a money thing, I won't lie," Reggie Evans said.

"But it's an ethics thing, too," said Wally Crane, KSLO's station manager. He was seated on a stool in the corner of conference room and until now had been silent. "At least that was my understanding."

"Ethics too," said Reggie Evans. "But more so, money. We can overlook ethics for the sake of business. You didn't hear me say that. God knows all this hubbub was good for ratings."

The complaints at hand dealt with KSLO's amateur photography contest. Its winner, Alice Kern, had captured several photos of the recent Benson Heights tornado. Her photos had been featured on the KSLO website. They showed an apartment building with its brick façade shorn off in the midst of the storm. Upon closer inspection, one photo revealed what seemed to be a figure—a young woman—hanging herself from the ductwork in one of the apartments. In the next photo the woman lay prone on the floor, a rope dangling from her neck.

Reggie Evans wasn't concerned with the content of Alice Kern's photos, he said. They were too blurry to be definite, taken from too far a distance. Even now, the general sentiment was that the photos were a hoax. The real issue, said Reggie Evans, was the manner in which Paul and Sarah had exploited the photos' dark nature. It so happened

that Alice Kern had been the in-studio guest for *Idle Time with Paul and Sarah*, the KSLO morning show, when speculation of the suicide girl had begun trending on social media. The result was too much attention all at once.

Listeners felt that Paul and Sarah had ambushed Alice Kern, a frail and sweet suburban grandmother, and that the station had withheld knowledge of the suicide girl, or even manipulated the images, to be sensational. In no time the trending labels shifted from *#IdleTime* to *#IdleCrime*. Callers clogged the phone lines, and a small, uncertain protest even formed outside in the KSLO parking lot. No one was more surprised than Alice Kern herself, who during the broadcast actually appeared to have a stroke (it was later ruled simple indigestion). And still, no one quite knew what had happened—Were the photos real? Did the girl exist? What did Paul and Sarah know beforehand? Regardless, KSLO had been implicated in either insensitivity or baseless hoodwinking. Neither was good business practice.

“So the photo contest was meant to publicize the station,” Paul Berlin said. “Which it did. Then it seems we’re being punished for doing something good.”

“Brand awareness is good,” Reggie Evans said. “But yes, you’re still being punished.”

“You said earlier we shouldn’t think of this as punishment,” Sarah said.

“Did I say that? It’s not punishment, per se.”

“But you did say you were happy about the ratings,” Paul said.

“Well, not at the expense of alienating our listeners,” said Reggie Evans. “That was an unhappy event.”

“So, I’m confused,” said Paul. “You’re happy or you’re not happy?”

“In general, I’d say I’m a happy person.” Reggie Evans paused, raising a hand to his chin. “I’m sure my wife would agree to that.”

“If I can interject,” said Wally Crane. “The good ratings are inconsequential when weighed against the bad publicity.”

“And we’re still losing our jobs,” Paul said.

“Definitely.” Reggie Evans pointed a finger. “You’re fired, Paul. And you’re fired, too, Sarah.”

That afternoon Lynn Bultema drove downtown and surprised her partner, Courtney, at work. (Lynn Bultema was Sarah Stetson’s real name. “Sarah Stetson” was merely a radio moniker that had stuck from her early days back in Santa Fe.) She snuck up behind Courtney, who was engrossed reading a gossip article online, and whispered, “*Hey.*” But Courtney was wearing earbuds and didn’t hear, so Lynn knocked on the metal frame of her cube. Then she just tugged the wire of Courtney’s earbuds.

Courtney spun in her chair and smiled. Lynn offered up her hands.

“You quit?” Courtney said.

“I got fired,” said Lynn.

“It’s all the same. The decision’s easier when it’s not your own. How did Paul take it?”

Lynn waved away the question. She sighed. “Are you hungry? There’s the vendors down on Market Street.”

They stopped at a food truck and split an order of hot bean tamales. The downtown streets were busy with foot traffic. It was late April, and the city’s baseball team was playing its first home series of the season. Lynn and Courtney found a bench

outside Macy's in the shade of the tall buildings. Courtney talked about her morning's work at the marketing company, but her stories were unimportant, and she was just making words so Lynn didn't have to. Then they finished the tamales and sat watching the people on the street.

Lynn said, "They didn't care about the girl in the photos. They didn't even ask. I get the idea it'll be swept under the rug."

"And would that be so bad?" Courtney asked. "Are you still thinking about the girl?" Lynn had been the first one to notice the young woman. She'd felt a premonition, actually, which had drawn her to Alice Kern's photos. But when she'd tried showing people—Courtney, Paul, Wally Crane—they'd all claimed she was seeing things. On the night before the radio show that caused all the trouble, Lynn and Courtney had gone to the Drakemore Arms, the building from Alice Kern's photos, and poked around the wrecked apartments with flashlights. While there, they'd come upon Paul Berlin and his girlfriend, Mary Ellen Martz, who were also looking to see what they'd find. And what they found was evidence that the girl from the photos did indeed exist. They saw the busted ductwork where the girl must have fastened her noose, they found her torn red sweater and a canvas tote bag, and they discovered the girl's blood on the carpet.

"I'm not thinking about much at all," Lynn said. Buses and bicyclists streamed by on the road. "I'm thinking we should get tickets to that baseball game. It would be nice to be around people."

"We'll have to be careful what we spend," Courtney said.

Lynn collected their tamale husks and dropped them in a garbage bin. "Don't worry," she said. "I'll bounce back. It's only Monday. I'll have something else by the end

of the week.”

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By the end of the week, though, all Lynn had done was get into the habit of sleeping each morning until nine—four hours later than she’d slept when she was doing the radio show. She would walk to the corner store and buy several different newspapers strictly for their crossword puzzles. One day she rearranged the living room furniture, and then the next day she rearranged it back. Her box of things from the KSLO office, with its papers and wires and the beveled wooden edges of plaques jutting out the top, migrated from the kitchen counter to the coffee table and then the spot beside the couch, but its contents throughout the week appeared untouched.

On Friday Courtney returned from work to find Lynn still—or already—in her pajamas. “I did make some phone calls,” Lynn said in her own defense. “I left a few messages.”

“Did you shower today?” Courtney asked. “You know what, it doesn’t matter. Just pull your hair back and put on some jeans. Let’s go out tonight.”

They went for dinner at a new place called Mongolian Dungeon, where the interior was all burgundy tapestries and tall candles, and the noodles slopped around in wooden bowls filled with dark sauce. The tines of the forks were sharp enough to be mistaken for torture implements. “Maybe this place was a bad idea,” Courtney said. “But at least we didn’t have to wait for a table.” A thin man with his mustache teased at its ends presented them their bill, which was pinned to a wooden platter by an ancient, rusty knife. “Maybe let’s see a show,” Courtney offered. “Like, something paint-by-numbers. A romantic comedy—or, hell, even something animated. Let’s get out of here, is what

I'm saying."

It was still early, just eight o'clock. Lynn suggested Wise Cracks, one of the city's comedy clubs. Paul might be doing crowd work, she said.

Wise Cracks was across town on the edge of the warehouse district. It was an area where people gathered but no one lived. Neon lights glowed in the windows of darkened clubs, and paunchy doormen sat outside on vinyl stools. Wise Cracks was busy. There was a line. When Lynn and Courtney got inside, they found Paul Berlin drinking a seltzer back by the bar.

"Are you going on tonight?" Lynn asked.

"I've been on. Just to warm up the crowd. Hi Courtney," he said. "Then I was supposed to go on again and I got bumped." Paul's arms were crossed and he was glaring at a frizzy-haired comic in suspenders and a bow tie on stage. The comic was affecting a nasally tone and arguing with a rubber fish.

"Who's that?"

"Dewey Dinkum," Paul said. "That's not his real name."

"No kidding?" Courtney said.

"His name's Harold. I saw it on a check once." Paul said something else but it was lost in a roar of laughter. "People eat this up," he said. "I don't get it."

"Does the fish have a name?" Courtney asked.

Lynn got a Sprite and Courtney got white wine and they went with Paul out back to a patio table. The umbrellas over each table were hung with some type of synthetic grass, and strings of little colored bulbs were meant to give the patio a tropical aura. Unlit tiki torches stood at the sides of a glass-top bar, and the cabinets were locked and there



was no one tending it.

Paul hadn't been looking for jobs either, he said. He believed a new job would find him, which was poor logic, but easier than subjecting oneself to the humiliation of re-entering the market after twelve years in the same place. Paul said he didn't even have a résumé.

"You don't think we should talk to Wally, do you?" Lynn said. "I mean, just to see, maybe, if we could get back on the air?"

"I don't think that'll happen. They've already pasted over the *Idle Time* billboards, have you seen?" Paul said. "Listen, I have to talk to you about something."

"Should I leave?" Courtney said.

"No, stay." Paul reached over and rooted through Lynn's purse until he found her cigarettes. (The two of them, Paul and Lynn, had been smokers who'd quit together, but then Lynn had broken down under the duress of the suicide girl photos.) "I've been getting calls," Paul said. "From reporters, and even from some people who just call themselves bloggers. What are these, menthols?" Paul held a cigarette between fingers but didn't light it.

"What do you mean *calls*?" Lynn said. "What do these people want?"

"They want to know about the photos. I say no comment," Paul said. "Ray Vilhauer's called me three times, the *Trib*'s police scanner guy."

"Vilhauer? That slimeball. No one's called me," Lynn said.

"But they wouldn't know how," Courtney said. "Right? If they're looking for Sarah Stetson."

This raised the question of radio names. Paul Berlin said he was going to stay

“Paul Berlin.” (His birth name was Paul Buntz. He was just the son of North Dakotan farmers. He’d chosen “Berlin” years earlier because it sounded cool and cosmopolitan, although he’d certainly never been to Germany.) Over the years he’d established a small local brand around “Paul Berlin.” Who knew if he would work again in radio? But if he was going to try to remain a media figure, which was his intention, he couldn’t go reinventing himself now.

“Well, what’s Vilhauer’s angle?” Lynn said.

“He doesn’t know what questions to ask,” Paul said. “They’re just trying to see what’s the story. I tell them there is no story. I’m saying this, Lynn, because if they keep digging—and really, we don’t have anything to hide—if they keep digging they’ll call you eventually. And you’ll have to decide what to say.”

Lynn took out a cigarette and flared her tiny lighter. Courtney swirled the wine in her glass. A bartender in flip-flops and a visor came out and lit the tiki torches.

“But we do have something to hide,” Lynn said. “The sweater, that canvas bag.” These two items they’d found in the wrecked apartment. They belonged to the girl, for certain. It was the red sweater that had drawn Lynn’s attention to the photos in the first place. And the canvas bag, hand-stitched with the word DOLLFACE, had been near the busted duct where the girl had presumably tied her rope.

Paul shrugged. “There’s no record. They don’t exist.”

“They’re in my trunk,” Courtney said.

“Then get rid of them,” Paul said. “Jeez. How creepy.” He returned the unlit cigarette to Lynn’s purse. The stereo came on playing a song by Jimmy Buffett, and the comedy club door opened and several patrons came out and ordered drinks and laughed

to one another recounting jokes. “Hey Stinkum,” Paul shouted. “I liked when you were juggling and took a bite out of that potato.”

Dewey Dinkum pulled the rubber fish from his pants pocket and waved it at Paul.

“It would be funny if you put a bowtie on the fish,” Paul said. “And then you and him could trade places, him doing jokes and you resting at the bottom of the river.”

\*

Ray Vilhauer never called Lynn, though. No one called her. She ran internet searches about KSLO, the Drakemore Arms, Alice Kern and Sarah Stetson. Nothing was happening. The world was going on like normal. Lynn searched *#IdleCrime* to find the label now being applied to an Oregon landscaper who’d passed out drunk on his riding lawnmower and idled through the city’s botanical garden, destroying tens of thousands of dollars worth of exotic succulents.

By her third week of unemployment she decided she was suffering something clinical. Her therapist, Dr. Avilas, drew attention to Lynn’s hair. Dr. Avilas was a pert, observant woman with a languid Latin American drawl. “You are not practicing self-care,” she said. “Look at those split ends. Look at those roots.” (Sarah Stetson had been a chemical-dyed blonde. Lynn Bultema was asserting herself as a natural brunette.) “Your hair is making a compromise,” said Dr. Avilas. “And so it is with your mind. ‘Am I Sarah,’ you are thinking, ‘or am I Lynn?’”

“I came for a prescription,” Lynn said. “Not a makeover.”

Dr. Avilas scrawled some words on a pad, ripped away the sheet and passed it to Lynn. *Get a haircut*, the note said. *Take a walk. Speak your mantra.*

Lynn did speak her mantra in the following days. The mantra had to do with

empathy. It was her and Dr. Avilas's secret—not even Courtney knew—because Lynn feared others would think it stupid. When passing strangers on the sidewalks or in the skyway, or when glancing to the car beside her at a red light, she would repeat in her mind the phrase, *Let's you and me be friends*. Lynn knew that at times she could succumb to frustration, petty judgment and existential malaise. Her mantra softened those feelings. It emboldened her to trust in herself as an agent of goodwill. Seldom did she talk to these people (seldom does anyone talk to strangers), but the mantra opened her heart, she believed, to acceptance and forbearance.

And she cut her hair. She took off a good twelve inches. Her stylist dyed the blond ends back to their original brown, and it was just long enough for Lynn to part down one side and sweep behind her ears. She looked older. But she looked good, too. The haircut seemed at first boyish, yet it affected Lynn's carriage, and the result was that she appeared more decisive and assertively feminine. One weekend she saw, by chance, Wally Crane standing outside an ice cream stand on Prairie Way with his granddaughter, and when she reached over and honked Wally turned and looked but made no sign of acknowledgement.

“Well, that was rude,” Lynn said.

“Look at yourself, though,” said Courtney. “You're not the girl from the billboards anymore.”

Then the light went green, and as they drove away Lynn turned in her seat to watch Wally switch hands with his cone and drop a scoop of ice cream right onto his shoe.

\*

For Ray Vilhauer the story of the suicide girl had gone cold. That's what Paul assumed, at least. Vilhauer had stopped calling him. Except there was one call that Paul didn't know about. One night he'd gone for takeaway at the Chicken Kitchen and left his phone at home. Mary Ellen Martz, his girlfriend, a yoga teacher and hopeless mystic, answered it. Vilhauer apologized, thinking he'd dialed the wrong number, but then Mary Ellen said she didn't believe in wrong numbers. "Maybe you were meant to reach me," she said.

The entire conversation, when Mary Ellen tried remembering it, seemed like a blur. Vilhauer was a streamroller, a slick little weasel. Mary Ellen knew she'd revealed too much. And that night while she and Paul ate from a paper bucket of chicken and hot rolls, she resolved that it was best to separate herself from any oncoming fallout, and she told Paul that maybe they should see other people, but they could still be friends, and that it wasn't him, but her, etc.

The worst part of the breakup was that Paul needed to find a new yoga studio. It seemed Mary Ellen taught here, and she taught there, and he never knew when she might be filling in for another yoga instructor somewhere else. So instead of yoga he went to the YMCA one weekday afternoon and joined a game of pick-up basketball. Paul was not good at basketball. He would cross his feet when defending and dribble off his toes on offense. At one point he stole a pass, got turned around, and chucked a three-pointer over the backboard of the opposing team's basket. Soon after, he landed awkwardly going for a rebound and broke his ankle.

"Don't try and get up," said a man with hairy shoulders and a damp tank top. "I'll go get someone."

“I can play,” Paul said. “I just need an ibuprofen.”

“Don’t be a dumbass,” said another man. “You got nothing to prove. Just stay down.”

“Nice try,” Paul said. “I know your game. Say it.”

“Say what?”

“Say I’m the best. Say you forfeit.”

“If it will get you to leave,” the man said.

A physician set Paul’s ankle and put him in a plaster cast with lime green wrapping. (Paul had asked for black wrapping, but he acquiesced when the ER nurse said no one would be able to sign a black cast, assuming by her suggestion that she was scheming a way to write down her phone number. One’s mind draws weird conclusions under the influence of hospital narcotics.) For three weeks Paul lurched around on wooden crutches. He showered twice with a grocery sack around his foot, but water leaked in both times, and then he just didn’t shower. The cast took on dirt and grime and darkened to a color like wilted lettuce.

It became easier and easier for Paul not to leave the apartment. He had TV shows he wanted to catch up on anyway. Some evenings he would stand on one foot in his living room and improvise jokes into an old digital recorder he’d stolen from the KSLO studios. One day his grocery deliveryman brought several bags of pizza rolls and frozen vegetables, and when Paul opened his door he realized the entire last week’s *Tribunes* had piled up on his welcome mat. It was among these papers that he encountered Ray Vilhauer’s story about Alice Kern’s photos and the Benson Heights tornado.

Vilhauer’s story appeared below the fold in the Metro section. It was titled “Dead

Air,” and below that was a deck head reading, “The Failed Making of a Myth.” The story itself was only sixteen column inches. Its thesis was that KSLO had attempted a publicity stunt, and that the stunt had failed, and now the station was in transition. Vilhauer, apparently, had been stymied in whatever half-truths he’d been seeking. His story included no quotes from anyone at KSLO, and the only artwork was an exterior shot of the Drakemore Arms, its façade under repair by several stories of metal scaffolding. The newspaper, when Paul read it, was already three days old.

He called Wally Crane at his office. “I saw the story,” Wally said. “But it’s nothing. I don’t think anyone read it.”

“Of course people read it,” Paul said. “It’s in the newspaper.”

“Sure, but who reads newspapers these days,” Wally said. “On that topic, who listens to the radio? No one,” Wally said. “No one listens to the radio.”

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Vilhauer’s story did have a small local impact, though. For a week or so, it was re-posted, reblogged and commented upon. Despite the story’s lack of substance, its concluding paragraphs seemed to hint at elements that were unknowable. To wit:

*Considering the declining state of terrestrial radio, KSLO might be a dying fish in a draining aquarium, an endangered bird in the vanishing outback. The station seems to be facing a density [sic] feared by all FM stations: that it will become, in time, as invisible as the odd wavelengths it transmits though the otherwise silent air.*

*And yet—“Some entities can’t be silenced, you know?” said one listener who requested anonymity. “People think the radio station did something*

*wrong, but what if the station was trying to help? No one wants to believe in what they can't see, and when they finally see something they want to pretend it's something else."*

The story's brief popularity was probably due more to the allure of unsolved mysteries than it was Mary Ellen Martz's final comments. Internet users speculated on whether the girl from the photos was in fact real, and, if she was, what might have become of her. But really, nobody knew anything. It was all just a bunch of hullabaloo. Little of worth is ever written in the depths of internet comment sections.

Local coverage of the suicide girl peaked when one of the TV news affiliates produced a story on "The Curse of Sad Elizabeth." Apparently some girls on the softball team in Shellton, the closest suburban rival to Benson Heights, had started a game where you closed your eyes, whirled around in a circle and chanted,

*Sad Elizabeth,  
why so depressed?  
Couldn't hang yourself  
so instead you slashed your wrist.*

The girls would spin until they fell down, at which point they claimed to lose consciousness and have their bodies entered by the spirit of the suicide girl.

"Kids are so fucked up these days," Lynn said to Wally Crane one afternoon at a table outside Java Junction. "And the system's failing them. Those girls from Shellton got suspended two games—that's it. No dialogue on suicide or self-harm, nothing."

"What bugs me is they called the girl Elizabeth," Wally said. "That's my granddaughter's name."



Lynn was picking apart a *pain au chocolat* but not eating it. “Then let me ask you something, Wally,” she said. “Hypothetically, what if it was your granddaughter who’d tried hanging herself? How would you respond?”

“I’d tell her parents to ground her.”

Lynn sighed. She had scheduled this lunch date to try drawing on Wally’s connections and get back into radio. But at that moment she changed her mind. “Here, I don’t want this,” she said, sliding her plate across the table. Wally took the flakes of bread and mashed them into a ball and bit into it. “I’d better go,” Lynn said. “I want to thank you for everything, Wally. KSLO was so good to me and Paul. Please tell everyone—”

She was interrupted by an open-cab Jeep at the parking meters playing Jimmy Buffett. It was a Gulf Coast song about stars and sand and seafaring.

“I keep hearing this song,” Lynn said. “I never liked Jimmy Buffett. Not even in college. Tell everyone at the station I say hello and I wish them the best, okay?”

“Bye, Lynn,” Wally said. “Your hair looks nice, in case I forgot to say that. I’ll see you again.”

\*

In July, Lynn took a job as an admissions counselor at one of the city’s small private colleges. For several weeks she staffed card-table information booths at local art camps and county fairs. Her mentor was a fresh-out-of-the-sorority girl named Doris Fern. Together they traversed the local freeways in a fleet Chevy Corsica with a silk pennant of the college’s coat of arms fastened to the radio antenna.

One afternoon they got into an argument with an admissions rep from another

local school. The problem was that Lynn and Doris's display board used the phrase FIRST SCHOLARS, which was the name of their school's summer recruitment program. The other admissions rep presented them with the brochure of her college's liberal arts curriculum, which was called SCHOLARS FIRST. "That's copyright infringement on you," the other woman said. "I've been told to tell you you need to change your sign."

"Change *our* sign?" Doris Fern said. "Do you have a patent on the English language? Is there a tiny C inside a circle on your brochure?"

"It's our phrase," the woman said. "We've been saying 'Scholars First' for years."

The argument kept going. From what Lynn surmised, these two schools were small enough to feel that one's littlest actions threatened the livelihood of the other. Doris got to criticizing the other school's lack of a marching band, while the opposing rep derided Lynn and Doris's school because its only exchange program was to Moldova. The argument became feverish at the subject of athletics. (Neither school had a football program, so their rivalry was rooted in an annual cross-country duel with the traveling trophy of a mounted bullhead.) Finally a man in a green polo shirt came over and asked what was the trouble. Doris explained to him the dispute, and the man walked away only to return with a small flier that featured his school's slogan: THE SCHOLAR'S FIRST CHOICE. "We just printed fifteen-hundred of these," he said. "And you're gonna tell me we can't use 'em?"

"I'm afraid so," said the other admissions rep. "I'll take that, thank you."

"This is dumb," Lynn said. She swept her bangs and breathed deeply out her nose. "I'm going home."

"It's only two-thirty," said Doris Fern.

“I know,” Lynn said. “I quit.”

It took twenty minutes for a taxi to arrive. The driver had rigid gray hairs protruding from his ear canal, and the cab smelled like beef broth. He braked in advance of every yellow light, until finally he swerved onto the freeway entrance. Lynn asked him to switch from an AM sports-talk station over to KSLO, on which the deejay Will Jeffers was interviewing a woman nutritionist. They were discussing vegetarian takes on Midwestern classics—dishes like tofu goulash and something called beetloaf. Then Will opened the phone line for questions. The first caller introduced himself as Wayne Waggle of Waggle Fabrics. In a kind and lilting voice, he asked what’s the difference between a lentil and a chickpea.

“Well, lentils we can think of as a slow-cooking bean,” said the woman on the radio, “whereas chickpeas—”

“Actually,” the caller said, “it’s that I don’t pay a hundred dollars to have a lentil on my face.” Then he hung up.

Lynn guided the driver toward the next exit and got out in the parking lot of a discount shoe mart. The sun was bright and the air above the concrete shimmered with the heat. Lynn took out her phone and dialed Paul. “Wayne Waggle, I presume,” she said.

“Lynn!” Paul said. “How are you?”

“I’m at a low point. How are you?”

“Low point,” he said. “These summer days are too long. I need a job.”

“You and me both.”

Lynn wasn’t far from Paul’s apartment. They agreed to meet halfway at a nearby city park. Lynn arrived first and found a bench beneath the shade, beside a small but

intricate Japanese garden. She smoked a cigarette while she waited. It was cooler in the park—quieter, too. All the foliage seemed to shutter off the bustle and turmoil of the city. Not far off were boys throwing Frisbees and young couples sunning themselves on blankets.

“What’s with the walking boot?” Lynn said as Paul hobbled to her bench.

“I took a tumble waterskiing.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” she said.

Paul sat down and he and Lynn recounted the last couple months of their lives. Things weren’t going so well. Careers, relationships, sense of purpose—things were going poorly, in fact. What do you do when you’re almost forty and you lose your sense of self? Paul said he was thinking of going back to the farm and helping with harvest. He needed the money. Lynn said she’d already thrown away the plaques and papers belonging to Sarah Stetson. But after that, she didn’t know what to do.

“Sometimes I worry I could die tomorrow,” Lynn said. “And while some people might vaguely mourn Sarah Stetson, it’s like *I* wouldn’t leave behind a thing of value.”

“Courtney would miss you. I’d miss you.”

“I don’t plan on dying yet,” Lynn said. “I’m still trying to decide what to do while I’m alive.” She unclipped her nametag from the college and slid it in her pocket. “What happened to that girl in the photos? Where is she now? That’s what I’m always thinking. It pissed me off that Vilhauer’s story didn’t say anything new.”

“What does ‘dollface’ mean?” Paul said. “It could be anything.”

“Nickname, I always thought,” Lynn said.

“And what happened to the rope? Why couldn’t we find that?”

Then the two of them were quiet. They both stared out ahead at the grass and the trees and the creek of the park. Paul had been carrying a shoulder bag, and he opened it and presented Lynn with the digital recorder from KSLO. “I stole this,” he said.

“Congratulations.”

“You can have it.”

“No thanks.”

“You can tell that girl’s story. I’ll help.”

Lynn hefted the recorder. It was old and bulky and made of hard plastic. Its stick microphone was connected with a long black wire. Lynn pushed play. Paul’s voice came on. “It’s one thing when you sit down to crap and you can only fart, but it’s another thing entirely when you’re trying to fart and you accidentally crap—” Lynn stopped the playback.

“You can erase that,” Paul said.

“I wouldn’t know where to start with that girl’s story. And I have no idea where it ends,” Lynn said. “Besides, I think she’s gone—gone from the city, that is. It’s just a feeling I have.”

“Say it into the microphone.”

Lynn searched for the record button. A small green light blinked on. “This is a story of a girl I’ve never met. I think she’s alive, but I think she’s far away now. I have a feeling. I can’t describe it. But I had a feeling once before and no one listened to me, and I was right that time.”

“Just keep talking,” Paul said. “It comes back to you.”

Lynn was still weeks away from anything like a watershed. She could trust her

instincts only so far. She would need to dig around and ask questions and look for clues, and she would need to remain attentive to signals. She would speak into the recorder and tell her own story, trusting that it would merge, in time, with the story of the young woman from the tornado photos. “This is Lynn Bultema,” she said into the microphone. “This is Lynn Bultema, and I have a story to tell.”

## NO THANKS

At age twenty Rachel Briggs felt for the first time a deepening sense of inner peace. That was the summer between her sophomore and junior years of college. She was living on campus at the time, on the second floor of a residence hall for student-athletes. One morning she woke at six-thirty and dressed in sweats to walk over to the cafeteria, only to find the stairwell outside her door cordoned off with yellow caution tape.

Rachel went back and looked out her window. There was a police car on the lawn, but its light bar was off and everything was quiet. A set of tire tracks weaved across the grass to a point just below Rachel's room. From her window, she could see the bed of a pickup truck carrying a dozen sandbags. The truck, apparently, had run into the building.

Rachel pulled down the yellow tape and then walked down the stairs and went outside. A police officer—a short, thick-limbed Latina woman—was inspecting the truck and making notes in a tiny wire-bound pad. “What happened?” Rachel asked.

“This truck ran into that building,” the officer said.

“No crap,” Rachel said. “When?”

“Sometime last night. We just got the call from a guy walking his dog.”

The truck in question was a Dodge, a big silver one with dual rear wheels. Fragments of brick lay on its hood and on the ground nearby. Its front bumper was affixed with a metal grille guard, which had plowed through the wall into the residence hall's boiler room, where steel canisters and metal pipes were strung with even more yellow tape. A man was seated twenty feet away on the grass, answering questions for another police officer. The man's face was scratched and his clothes chalky were from the airbag. “Is that guy all right?” Rachel asked.

“He’s hungover and his nose is broken,” said the officer. “He was asleep when we arrived.”

“Should I go get an ice pack?”

“What, an ice pack?” said the officer, stepping back from the cab of the truck.

“No, that won’t be necessary. Who are you, by the way?”

“My name is Rachel. I live up there.”

“In that room?” the officer said. “Then I should be asking you the questions.”

Rachel’s resident assistant, a senior volleyball player named Holly Porter, came walking through the grass, spinning the roll of yellow caution tape around her index finger.

“Who’s this girl?” the officer asked Holly Porter.

“Her name’s Rachel. She lives up there.”

“Hello?” Rachel said.

The officer put on a skeptical look. “You live there, above where the truck hit? And you’re just noticing all this now?”

Rachel shrugged.

“You must be a heavy sleeper,” said the officer.

“Not normally,” Rachel said. “It used to be I couldn’t fall asleep at night. And then for a while I would wake up every hour and make sure my door was locked. It got bad. I’d never sleep more than a few hours each night, total, and then it would catch up with me and I’d crash out during class, and sometimes I’d wake up in the lecture hall really confused because the teacher would be talking about criminal justice but I was supposed to be in biology. But lately I’ve been sleeping better. It’s gotten easier, I guess. I’m not on edge like I used to be.”



The officer had been keeping eye contact with Rachel, then finally she blinked and said, “That’s a bunch of information I don’t care about.” She went back to looking at the truck and writing things in her notepad.

“That was you in the criminal justice lecture?” Holly Porter said. “I was in that class. One time you were snoring and I poked your nose with my eraser.”

Rachel and Holly stepped back to make room for the woman officer. She crossed to the other side of the truck, scanned the area, then joined the other officer and the man on the grass. It seemed the chance for drama had passed, and there was nothing more to see or do.

“You really didn’t hear anything?” Holly said.

“Nothing,” Rachel said.

“Well, that’s messed up. Did you eat breakfast yet? Today is Friday. French toast sticks. Adios, Rachel. I’m going that way. This is their yellow tape, but I want to keep it.”

\*

That weekend Rachel called her friend Darren Hunt and explained the episode with the truck. Darren was a year younger than Rachel, and he lived back in the hometown she’d moved away from when she was fourteen.

Darren seemed to miss the point of Rachel’s story. He was more interested in the oddity of the crash. Where was the guy coming from, Darren asked, or where was he going? “I don’t know,” Rachel said. “I guess he was coming from a bar, and maybe he was going home.” Did the guy know Rachel, or did she know him? “No,” Rachel said, “he was just a random guy.” And what happened to the hole in the side of her building? “Someone covered it with plywood boards.” And the truck, what happened to that? “It

was gone when I got back from breakfast,” Rachel said. “Darren, you’re not listening. The truck and the guy and all that, it was a coincidence. The point is that I’m not waking up at the slightest noises anymore. I’m calm these days. I’ve gotten a lot calmer.” Then as a joke she added, “I’m calm, goddammit!”

“Still, it’s a weird situation,” Darren said. “I wouldn’t feel safe there if I was you.”

“Oh, give it a rest,” Rachel said into her phone. She was lying on a bench in the student union. The coffee shop and bookstore were closed, and only a few Korean students were sitting on the couches watching a baseball game on the television. “It’s quiet and safe and slow here this summer. I’m taking six credits. I’m running with the girls twice a day. That no one got hurt from the truck only proves how lucky we are.”

Darren humphed through the phone. “Another way of looking at it is *trouble finds you*.”

“I’m hanging up now,” Rachel told him. “Take care of yourself, okay?”

“I love you,” Darren said.

“Bye now,” Rachel said and ended the call. She got up and sat by the students watching baseball, although she didn’t care and couldn’t focus on the game. She was right, she thought, and Darren was wrong. For the guy in the truck, there was one story. For the cops or Holly Porter, different stories. And for Rachel, the story was about how comfortable she’d gotten in her surroundings, how forgiving she’d become toward others, how easy she felt in her own skin. Her story wasn’t about a drunk fellow and a truck and some bricks. It was about a young woman who now glided through life in light and airy steps.

Rachel's psychiatrist interpreted things differently. He claimed Rachel had slept through the crash because of her anti-anxiety meds. "It's nothing to celebrate," said Dr. Leventhaler, a nearsighted man who strictly wore paisley neckties. "Now we need to scale back your dosage, and you need to start your sleep journal again."

"It wasn't the meds," Rachel said from her seat across Dr. Leventhaler's desk. By now five days had passed since the episode with the truck, and Rachel felt as buoyant as she had that first morning. "I kept sleeping because I don't feel threatened anymore."

Dr. Leventhaler argued that no well-adjusted person should sleep through that commotion. He said it was a problem they could solve with medication.

"I gotta be honest," Rachel told him. "I'm not taking those meds. I quit filling the prescription, like, two years ago."

Dr. Leventhaler observed Rachel to see if she was lying. Then he marked some boxes on an assessment form. "Why aren't you taking the meds?"

"I heard they give you stomach cramps and loose stools."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Medical journal I found on the library database."

Dr. Leventhaler looked up from his form. "Now you are lying. Why aren't you taking your medication, Rachel?"

She leaned forward and put her elbows on her knees. She had her reasons for not wanting medication, she said. Mainly, she liked doing things the hard way. This practice she had learned from her track and cross-country training. Shortcuts only led to weakness. So following that logic, pills could only give her artificial happiness. Rachel had never believed her problems were chemical, and for that reason she'd given up on the

pills.

“So you’ve been lying to me for years,” said Dr. Leventhaler.

Rachel nodded. “It used to be I wanted to please everyone, you included,” she said. “But I feel differently now. Now I could give a rat’s ass.”

“Fine, I’m not upset,” said Dr. Leventhaler, creasing the assessment form between his fingernails and floating it into a wire trash basket. “But think like this: your new attitude is an outcome. The truck in the building was the recognition point. And before that, something was a cause. So what’s the cause of your new attitude, Rachel?”

“Jeez, I don’t know. I didn’t want to think about it that hard.” Rachel shifted in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. “Time, I guess. It’s been almost six years.”

The time Rachel was measuring referred to when she was fourteen, when she’d been abducted for three days. She’d been held captive, in fact, out in the woods by Lake Superior. Her abductor had been an older boy named Brad Van Laecken, who had lured Rachel into his Mustang and taken her to the broken-down RV where he lived with his uncle. His uncle, Jersey, fit in every way the profile of a paranoid and manipulative loner—distrustful of the government, hateful toward minorities, abusive toward women and animals. Jersey preferred living a sequestered life off the grid. And so long as he kept to himself, he’d proven harmless. But when Brad returned with Rachel that cold and rainy night, Jersey began forming thoughts to abscond with her, enslave her, make her into a child bride and start what he believed would become a newly pure, industrious and obedient race.

Rachel escaped before any of that happened. She attempted, in her own clumsy way, to seduce both Brad and Jersey, turning them against one another, and one morning

while they fought she fled to Brad's Mustang and crashed it into the side of the RV, consequently trapping them both inside. She got help, and the two men were arrested. That winter Rachel moved in with her oldest sister two hours south in the big city. Back then she was still Rachel Dahl, her birth name, but at the suggestion of a social worker she adopted the sister's married name and became Rachel Briggs. It wasn't so easy, though, dismissing the events in the woods by Lake Superior.

Rachel was tentative throughout high school, defensive and at her worst almost feral. Back up north, her mother died running her car in a closed garage. Word later arrived that Jersey had passed away in prison, reasons unspecified. And much of Rachel's energy went into running. She was good at it. She acquired all sorts of medals and trophies, even if the awards didn't matter to her. What mattered was the routine and the discipline. Her best victories were when she anchored her school's 4x800 relay, when she was part of a team. And running got her a partial scholarship to college, where Rachel was now majoring in the humanities and living in the athletes' dorm, finally confident enough to cut ties with Dr. Leventhaler, her dully pragmatic psychiatrist.

"So I guess this is the end for us," Rachel said. "Kind of sad. But not really. Actually, not at all. If it makes you feel better, it's not you, it's me."

"I disagree with your decision to end treatment," said Dr. Leventhaler.

"And I disagree with your neckties. I do have the clinic phone number, of course," Rachel said, standing from her chair to shake Dr. Leventhaler's hand. "I know to call if things get bad again, okay?"

\*

That fall Rachel took a work-study job with the registrar's office. She was

scheduled there ten hours a week, processing emails and stuffing transcripts into envelopes. Her classes were a breeze. She was taking fifteen credits—some of them upper-level history or literature, for which she almost never had to read the material. And the cross-country season was her best yet. Mornings Rachel would run with her teammates, and evenings she might do circuit training on her own. In October she set a personal best at the conference meet and even traveled to Colorado for the small-college nationals. On weekends when she wasn't racing, she began seeing more of Darren Hunt, who had transferred in to the big state university across town.

Winter was a different beast. Snow came early, with northern winds, sub-zero temperatures, long bouts of darkness. Her boss in the registrar's office would sometimes appear from nowhere and place his hands on her shoulders, making her uncomfortable enough that she arranged a transfer to the admissions office. For the first time Rachel competed in the indoor track season, but running five kilometers on the tight curves of the indoor track would leave her dizzy and disoriented, and then in February she suffered a stress fracture in her left shin. To keep active she began resistance training in the campus pool, which was poorly kept, and she came down with large blemishes of ringworm on her lower back.

She and Darren had been spending weekends together at one another's dorms, but then she withdrew while her skin cleared up. Darren put up a fit. Even when they had stayed the night together, Rachel insisted on sleeping in different beds. She'd never taken comfort in being touched. If ever Darren placed a hand below her shoulders or above her knees, her skin would turn instantly clammy. Inadvertently, she isolated herself. Alone in her dorm room that winter, she lounged in sweatpants for entire days, eating packaged

snacks and watching shows on her computer. At one point she realized it had been three weeks since she'd washed her hair.

Her low point came one afternoon when, upon returning from her Social Anthropology class, she discovered a squirrel in her dorm room. How it got there was anyone's guess. At first Rachel kept the door open and tried shooing the squirrel into the hallway, but it merely scurried beneath the coils of the heat register. Rachel went over and rustled her fingers, until surprisingly the squirrel approached her. She rubbed its ears like one would a small dog, and its tail weaved playfully through the air. Then, in one quick motion, Rachel snatched it up and popped its head back with the heel of her other hand, snapping its neck. "Who's room is this?" she asked, staring into the squirrel's filmy eyes. "It's my room. You do not enter my room." Following that she stuffed the squirrel down a toilet in the residence hall bathroom, washed her hands under scalding water, and then returned to her own room and lay on the floor crying, raking her forearms until blood pooled in the crescents of her fingernails.

In spring Rachel rejoined the track team, and in no time she was back to her old weight, running as much as twelve miles a day, and her complexion was clear and healthy. Although her classes that semester were more demanding—Abnormal Psychology and Poetry of the Enlightenment, especially—she found plenty time to study in the admissions office. Her job there was absurdly undefined, her supervisors comically incompetent. Some weeks she would fill out her timecard for ten hours despite being in the office only fifteen minutes on a Friday afternoon. And the weather! In late March the rain washed away the winter grit from the sidewalks. Rachel competed in the 5K and sometimes the 10K, and at one out-of-state meet she even entered the steeplechase and

won it by a full thirty seconds. She and Darren reconciled and made their status official, although as part of the bargain she forbade him from saying the L-word. And throughout the entire academic year, Rachel never once called Dr. Leventhaler at the clinic.

Early one morning after finals, she and Darren went running on a trail along the Mississippi River. A thin fog rose up from the banks, birds chirped in the sagging willow trees, and sunlight burst through the branches like a strobe. Rachel talked to Darren about summer work. Her sister and former guardian, Bethany, had asked her back to the language camp where Rachel had studied and worked in the kitchen during her high school summers. “I’d be a bunk counselor, full time,” Rachel said. “Just two months—June and July—but I’d make money and have a place to stay.”

“Can’t you work in the admissions office?” Darren asked.

“I’d rather jump in that river and sink to the bottom,” Rachel said. “Besides, *J’aime la nature, et je suis contente d’être maîtresse.*”

“I can’t keep up,” Darren said.

“Of course,” Rachel said. “You don’t speak French.”

“No, I can’t run anymore.” He plodded to a halt and rested his hands on his hips. Darren was tall and thin and only now growing out of his gangliness. Back when he and Rachel were teenagers, Darren had run with such an angular posture and uplifted chin that the girls on the cross-country team had said he looked like an ostrich. “How far was that?” he asked.

Rachel looked at her timing watch. “Four miles. Thirty minutes.” She pulled an ankle back against her rear, stretching her quad. “Should we turn around?”

Darren left the trail and gripped the sides of a brass plaque describing the



geological history of the river. He stretched a calf muscle on one of its support beams.

“That would be two months we wouldn’t see each other,” he said. “What am I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know,” Rachel said. “Live in your parents’ basement and get a job hauling garbage. Cut down branches. Do what other college kids do in the summer.”

Darren said he wasn’t going back home. Now that he was officially an upperclassman, he planned to move off-campus. A couple weeks earlier, in what Rachel had thought was an innocent play date, they had toured an apartment complex outside the city, in a suburb called Benson Heights. “I put down the deposit on a two-bedroom. And I’m asking, will you move in with me, Rachel?”

“Oh, Darren. That’s a very serious question.”

“You make me want to be serious,” he said.

“Don’t you think we’re a bit young to be moving to the suburbs? That’s like putting a newborn colt out to pasture.” Rachel went and stood at the other side of the informational plaque. The fog had lifted from the river. Traffic zipped across a nearby interstate bridge. “Darren, we’re barely grown-ups. You can’t even legally drink. And I have issues. Rightly so! You know that more than anyone.”

“Fine,” he said. “I’m walking back. I’ll see you at the car.”

“No, you have to run with me. I can’t let you stay here while I go on. My poetry professor would gag at the symbolism. Finish your stretch, then let’s go. Hup hup.”

\*

Once the summer camp season ended, Rachel stayed a couple weeks at her sister Bethany’s house. Bethany was thirteen years older, a schoolteacher now on her second

marriage. And she was no longer Bethany Briggs—that marriage had already separated when Rachel moved down after the incident in the woods—but had taken the name of her second husband, Wayne Routh. Together, Bethany and Wayne Routh had a house with a yard in Carlisle, another of the city’s suburbs. The yard had been essential when they’d married three years earlier. They had plans for a big family. In fact, they already had one toddler girl named Althea, and at dinner one night Rachel asked what name they’d choose if next they had a boy.

“Bronson,” said Wayne Routh. “It’s strong, forceful, take-no-nonsense.”

“Definitely not Bronson,” Bethany said. “That is one-hundred percent dumb. He’s kidding, Rachel. Because of Charles Bronson, the old action star.”

“I don’t know him.”

“Van Damme,” Wayne suggested. He speared a beef cube and held it up like an exhibit. “Norris Routh, kick you in the mouth.”

Bethany rolled her eyes. She and Wayne were ceaselessly playful, Rachel had observed over the years. They hadn’t endured much in the way of trouble—not emotional, nor medical, nor financial—but Rachel figured trouble was relative for Bethany and Wayne. They were minimizers. Most problems they dismissed with a flippant joke. It was a deliberate attitude that Rachel wanted to cultivate, and which she doubted Darren Hunt ever would.

“We called the girl Althea... for its sound, right? I don’t remember our reasons,” Wayne said. “It just felt right.”

“There’s a Grateful Dead song called ‘Althea,’” said Rachel.

“Oh, great,” Bethany said. “And it’s probably too late to change her name now.”

Wayne took a drink of milk. “I wanted to name her Ruth.” And just then, the girl called out from another room. Wayne set his napkin on the dining table and stood. “I got my name because of John Wayne,” he said. “True story. And yet I’ve never once rode a horse.”

\*

The conversation about names stuck in Rachel’s mind. That fall she began thinking how Briggs was entirely unsuitable. It was just the convenient name, assigned to her years earlier for reasons she hadn’t understood—protection? recovery? reinvention? She’d hardly known Perry Briggs, only that his and Bethany’s divorce had been an easy decision for both parties.

Also that fall Rachel gave in and called Dr. Leventhaler. Her feelings of inner peace had been eroding. For Rachel, college was a shelter, an insulated ecosystem, but now here she was in her senior year. The world beyond graduation seemed volatile and uncaring. She wasn’t afraid of strangers crashing trucks into brick walls—*that* was exciting—but she feared losing her resources and routine. Dr. Leventhaler declined to treat Rachel, however. Instead he referred her to a young female therapist named Dr. Avilas.

Dr. Avilas’s office was up in the Rivertown district, just north of downtown. It was an area with brick roads and old-growth maple trees, bicycle shops and boutique design firms. Rachel had to take the bus. In her first meeting with Dr. Avilas, she told about how her life would change once she graduates. No longer would she have the camaraderie of the track team, the structure of classes and practice, the security of life in a residence hall.

Dr. Avilas listened while making notations on a canary legal pad. She was a young woman with a smooth face and dark black hair, and she spoke with a languid Latin American drawl. “So you are uncertain about your future,” she said to Rachel. “You are facing adult challenges for the first time.”

“Well, not for the first time,” Rachel said. “I wouldn’t say that.”

“I will concede that the working world can be disheartening,” Dr. Avilas continued. “Beginning now you should ease yourself into it, one step at a time.”

Together they identified Rachel’s interests. She liked running, she said, and talking on the phone and watching travel shows and writing poetry. And she was happy being a student—she liked learning things, even if sometimes she liked slacking off even more. So Dr. Avilas suggested Rachel take an extra class outside the college. For instance, just across the river was the city’s literary arts center, where Rachel might enroll in a poetry class.

“I like that idea,” Rachel said. “A different class with different people. Yeah. Okay.”

“There. I believe you are cured. Good luck with your life,” said Dr. Avilas. She unclicked her pen and rested it on her legal pad. “I jest. We are out of time for today. Are there topics we should discuss next time?”

Rachel thought a moment. “Well,” she said, “seven years ago I was kidnapped and almost made into some guy’s sex slave. Then a few years later my mom killed herself in a garage. And I never knew my dad. And my boyfriend wants me to move in with him even though my insides freeze up whenever someone touches me.”

Dr. Avilas looked up at the clock on her wall. Then she looked at Rachel, and at

the notes on her legal pad, and then again at Rachel. “All right, that is something we can work with. We will save that for next week.”

After the session Rachel crossed a footbridge to the literary center, which was housed in a converted flour mill. Inside it had the exposed brick, wooden rafters and chrome-like ducts of a renovated warehouse. There was a café on the main floor, and Rachel ordered a root beer and thumbed through the center’s program guide. The poetry section listed more than a dozen classes being offered that fall—some on imagist poems, narrative poems, formal poems like sonnets and sestinas. Encountering the breadth of topics made Rachel aware of how little she actually knew. So she filled out the information card and under CLASS DESIRED wrote, *poems that rhyme*. And because she was trying something new, she scratched out where she’d written her name as *Rachel Briggs* and changed it to *Rachel Dahl*.

\*

Her class met on Thursday nights and was taught by an austere and self-serious poet named Gary Malloy. Rachel looked him up online and found that he’d published a few poetry collections twenty years earlier, but that no critics had taken him seriously because he’d also released several albums of sentimental folk songs and spoken-word ballads. The class was intended for beginners. Among Rachel’s classmates were a meek accountant, a retired seed salesman, a young boy still a year shy of puberty, and a spinster who wore hand-knitted sweaters the color of mold.

One week their assignment was to write a love poem to themselves from the perspective of a heartsick admirer. Rachel’s poem was called “Forever Fourteen,” and it read, in part:

*On the trails and track you leave me  
hamstrung. You wear down my legs  
and burn out my lungs. I could crawl,  
call for you—Dollface—  
and the more urgent my pleas  
the quicker your pace.*

The poem had come easy to Rachel. Back up north her freshman year of high school, she arrived to school one morning to find her locker decorated with gold ribbons and little stickers of feet with wings, and a pep rally poster with her name written as *Dollface*. It was Darren's nickname for her. At the time he was just an eighth-grader running junior varsity, and he'd risked getting dunked headfirst into a toilet even showing his face in the high school hallways. The gesture seemed silly then, and it seemed silly now, but to Rachel it marked the beginning of Darren's admiration and devotion.

The two of them hadn't even dated when Rachel lived up north. Darren was only thirteen then. Thirteen-year-old boys, Bethany had once told Rachel, hardly know their dicks from their elbows. It wasn't until Rachel's senior year, when Darren spotted her at an Allman Brothers Band concert at the State Fair, of all places, that they reconnected. After that they talked on the phone maybe once or twice a month, despite Dr. Leventhaler's disapproval. It was nothing romantic, not at first. Darren knew about the incident in the woods—it had been in the newspapers—and yet he never raised the issue. Only lately had he begun acting needy and lovelorn, for which moving to the apartment in Benson Heights had done him no good.

Anyhow, Rachel didn't feel she was betraying Darren to write her poem from his

perspective. The poem was just an exercise. And it went over well among her classmates.

“I like that ‘hamstrung’ can be the leg muscle, so it’s a running word, but it can also mean, like, frustrated or something,” said another girl in the class.

“Yes,” said Gary Malloy, “the word choice in this poem is quite deft.”

“But I don’t know,” said the old seed salesman. “‘Hamstrung’ makes me think of my honeymoon in Italy, where the villagers would hang out these big ham hocks to cure in the sun. And my honeymoon was a very happy time. I don’t think that’s the mood you were going for.”

“The ‘Dollface’ part is nice,” said the sweater-wearing spinster. “Can’t say why. It’s really affecting to me.”

Gary Malloy kept Rachel after class that night. He was the literary center’s education director, and his wide, well-appointed office overlooked the river. He had Rachel sit across from him in a leather chair, and he began talking about the unexpected places one finds poetic inspiration. The whole scene was disconcerting to Rachel. It was late at night, dim and quiet in the building, and Darren would soon be arriving to take her for ice cream and then drive her back to campus.

“I’d like you to apply to my master’s class next spring,” said Gary Malloy. “It’s for students in whom I detect a certain... promise. Here, there’s a poetry collection I believe you’ll find most instructive.” He plucked a thin book from his shelf and came around the desk and sat next to Rachel, his knee touching hers.

“*The Desiring Palm*,” Rachel said, reading the title. “Wait, *Poems by Gary Malloy*. This is your book.”

“Study it, will you?”

“I ought to go,” Rachel said. “I’ll think about the class.”

That fall was Rachel’s best cross-country season yet. Once she even had her picture on the front page of the *Tribune*’s sports section. The occasion was her college’s annual duel against its intercity rival, at which the winning team received a traveling trophy of a mounted bullhead. Rachel won the meet handily, and the photo showed her nearing the finish line, all the runners behind her looking small and out of focus.

NOTHING FISHY HERE read the story headline, and below that it said, BRIGGS BAGS BULLHEAD. Again Rachel qualified for nationals, where this time she finished in the top fifteen, and when she returned home her teammates greeted her at the airport with a banner and an enormous stuffed elephant, which was her school’s mascot.

As for her and Darren, she purposely kept her distance. She would spend time with him during daylight on the weekends—these were the boundaries suggested by Dr. Avilas—but otherwise she claimed classes and training as her two priorities. Still, Rachel and Darren spoke on the phone each night. He was her best friend, after all. But the more she talked about men with Dr. Avilas, the more Rachel realized the complexity of her trust issues.

And for that reason, she never returned to Gary Malloy’s poetry class. The week after he’d given her his book, Rachel emailed to say she had strep throat. Then the next week she claimed her grandma was in the hospital. And after that she decided it was easier not to lie, but rather just fade away, and she stopped thinking about Gary Malloy and poetry altogether.

When the dorms closed down for the holidays, Rachel moved in with the Rouths. In previous years she would rest a couple weeks in her pajamas, watching sappy movies,



and reading old favorites like *The Boxcar Children* for fun. This season, however, Bethany came down with a bug and Rachel got roped into babysitting duty. Althea, by now, had settled into her terrible twos—bawling and fighting and sneaking away if ever Rachel turned her back. At night the child would cry and call out every twenty minutes, keeping the entire house awake.

One morning Althea appeared under the kitchen table and bit Rachel's knee as she was eating a bowl of granola. "Stop it!" Rachel said. "I will kick you. I will push you around." She felt wretched saying this, even knowing the child didn't understand. Yet she repeated it like a mantra—"I will kick you, push you around, lift you up and twist your neck"—lowly enough that no one could hear, until she realized in fact she might be saying it to herself.

In January she got a call from an assistant at the literary center, notifying her she'd been accepted into the poetry master's class. "That's odd," Rachel said, "because I never applied."

"I don't know how the system works," said the assistant. "But Mr. Malloy says you qualified for the full scholarship. And he'd like to schedule a conference before the first class."

"No thanks."

"There's something else," said the assistant. "Someone left a bag for you. Can you stop by the office some time? Ask for me, my name's Colin."

So one day after her session with Dr. Avilas, Rachel crossed the river and went up to the literary center's reception desk. The bag was a canvas tote, heat-pressed on one side with the center's logo. It was empty. "What? An empty bag?" Rachel said. "Thanks

for nothing, Colin.”

“Actually, turn it over,” Colin said. “It says something.”

There on the back on the tote, someone had hand-stitched the word DOLLFACE in thick black letters. Around that were embroidered trees and what looked like a road narrowing into the horizon.

“Oh,” Rachel said. “I see now.” She put her fingers over the thread. It was soft and tightly woven—skillfully done. “I know who did this. She was in my class, I think. Did you see who left this for me? Was she wearing a thick ugly sweater?”

“Lots of people wear thick ugly sweaters around here in winter,” Colin said.

“Well, thank you,” Rachel said. Her face was flushed. She didn’t know how to respond to such generosity. And so before she left she signed up for a beginner-level poetry class, this one taught by a woman Colin assured her was old and indifferent and, according to the end-of-term evaluations, among the mildest of all the center’s teachers.

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One night in March she and Darren made plans to go for dinner after class. He picked her up from the literary center and merged north onto the freeway. It was officially spring, but there was fog in the air and frost on the highway signs. A jazz program played softly on the radio. Rachel asked why they were driving north.

“Going to Chili’s,” Darren said. “Steak fajitas, right?”

Soon he turned off at the exit for Benson Heights.

“Darren, there’s like five Chili’s restaurants in the city. There’s one right by campus. So why are we out here by your apartment?”

Darren didn’t say anything. He pulled onto a tree-lined residential street and

turned off the ignition. “How come you never stay with me anymore?” he asked. “Sleep with me tonight, at my place.”

“I have class in the morning,” Rachel said.

“No you don’t.”

“But I have things to do. And I need my own space. It’s how I am.”

In truth, Rachel had been sleeping poorly of late. She had a new neighbor in the dorms, a softball player who’d dated three or four different guys already that semester. They came and went all times of the night, laughing and spilling things and playing music. But she couldn’t tell Darren this, knowing he’d use that point to argue she move in with him.

“Come on, let’s get dinner and watch a show at my place,” he said. He reached over the center console and took her by the wrist. “Rachel, are you my girlfriend or not?”

“Take me home, please,” she said. “I don’t like being kept places.”

Darren started the car and went back toward the freeway. Then he said something scary. “I should take you back with me whether you like it or not. You’ve been teasing me for years.”

“Let me out,” Rachel said.

Darren pulled over and Rachel got out on the side of the road. She waved him on and he inched the car forward. Then he hit the gas, but tentatively so, and Rachel ran after him and slapped the car to get his attention. He pulled to a stop and she opened the door.

“I forgot my little bag,” she said. “Bye, Darren. Don’t call me for a week.”

He drove off, leaving Rachel near the freeway exit. She looked at her phone. It was late already. Behind a gas station and car wash she found a deserted frontage road.

She figured she might walk to Bethany and Wayne's house in Carlisle, or else she would call a cab or search for bus routes back into the city. It was cold out, and the road was iced over in parts.

Suddenly Rachel was taken with a strange impulse. Ahead of her was a road sign saying SPEED LIMIT 30. It glistened from the passing headlights on the freeway. Rachel imagined that if she could sprint forward and reach a speed of thirty miles per hour, she might leap up into the sign and snap its metal post like a yellow-barrel pencil, sparking a wormhole or some trick of physics that would transport her directly under the blankets of her lofted bed in the dorms.

She took off at a sprint toward the sign.

Immediately she wiped out on a patch of ice.

She fell to the pavement and rolled off into the ditch. "Ouch," she said. She had banged her knee on the road and landed awkwardly on the water bottle in her bag. Still, she was okay. She got up and brushed the dirt off her pants, and looked to see if anyone was watching, but she was alone in the weeds beside the frontage road. "All right, like nothing happened."

And before she managed two steps, her feet got tangled and she fell again. Sitting up, she unloosed a cord or a long piece of string from her ankles. It was *a snake*, she thought, but no, it was just a thin fabric strap, ten feet long at least, the sort used for securing pallets on a flatbed trailer. Attached to one end was a hefty brass buckle. Rachel's heart was racing. Obviously she wasn't thinking right. She was overreacting, and she forced herself to laugh, and in doing so she reconsidered the way she'd been treating Darren. Then she got to her feet once more and started back for his apartment,

winding the strap around her waist as if it might keep her warm.

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She didn't stay with Darren that night, though. Something kept her from knocking on his door—pride, maybe, or constancy. “Fear,” said Dr. Avilas. “You were afraid he might hurt you.”

“No, he's not capable of that,” Rachel said.

“Then how do you explain his threat in the car?”

“He had a bad moment.”

“You are expressing the rationale of a battered woman,” said Dr. Avilas.

“It was probably my fault.”

“You just did it again.”

“He's been under a lot of stress lately.”

“Are you making a joke of this?”

Rachel stretched out her arms and rested them on the back of Dr. Avilas's velvety couch. “Okay, I was angry still, and a little scared,” she said. “And I wasn't ready to try resolving things.” So Rachel had settled for a temporary solution. The west side of Darren's building, the Drakemore Arms, had several spec units with dummy locks. Rachel knew this from when the property manager had first given her and Darren a tour of the building. She entered a vacant apartment on the fourth floor hoping for furniture or a blanket, only to find, oddly, a milk crate and a box of pink erasers. So Rachel cranked the thermostat and slept that night on the floor of the master bedroom, her rolled-up tote bag for a pillow. “And you know what, I slept like garbage, Dr. Avilas. I need to change something.”

“I am not giving you a prescription.”

“Don’t want one,” Rachel said.

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The next week Rachel turned her ankle bounding over a curb during track practice. The school’s athletic trainer drove out in a golf cart and returned her to a tiny examination room on campus, where she angled Rachel’s foot in different ways, watching for the severity of her reaction. Nothing was broken, the trainer said. It was probably a high-ankle sprain. The trainer held her out of practice for a week and prescribed water workouts at the campus pool, which Rachel skipped, then on her first day back with the team, she pulled up short during intervals and returned to the examination room. The trainer took off Rachel’s shoe and put her through the same battery of tests. “You aggravated it,” she said. “You need a heavy dose of rice: rest, ice, compression, elevation. We like to use little sayings.”

“I know what ‘rice’ means,” Rachel said. She asked how long until she could run again, and the trainer responded four to six weeks. “Whoa, wait,” said Rachel. “In four to six weeks it’ll be summer. This is my senior year.”

“You look disappointed,” the trainer said. “You can have a lollipop from that bowl by the magazines. Stay here, I’ll get you a pair of crutches.”

“Better not,” Rachel said. “I’ll only want to smash things with them.”

The next weekend she traveled with the team to an out-of-town meet and cheered along from the infield, but it wasn’t the same being a spectator. By then Rachel had abandoned the crutches, but her ankle was still swollen and plum colored. When they got home she packed up her school sweats and her competition gear and returned them to the

athletic office. Her senior season was finished. She accepted that. But she didn't know what was meant to fill its space.

One afternoon in April Darren came down and picked her up from campus, and together they drove circles around the chain of lakes, listening to the radio and watching the boaters. He hadn't recovered his sense of decorum after their argument, but Rachel could forgive him. She needed a friend and she didn't want to be alone. Outside it was humid but cloudy. They kept their windows down and let the air move through the car.

She told Darren about her sense of loss following the injury. She said she could deal with no longer being a college runner. Later on, once her ankle healed, she could train for marathons or triathlons or whatever else might give her a buzz. Instead, the loss came from realizing how unprepared she was for life beyond college. For the last week, for instance, she'd been researching graduate schools and teaching-abroad programs only to find that every worthwhile deadline had passed months earlier.

"You've never planned ahead well," Darren said.

"On purpose." Rachel explained how her coping strategy was to live in the moment—no past, no future. But the moment right now wasn't that great to live in. There were small things, like assignments and paperwork and cell phone bills. But there were big things, too. Her school insurance was about to terminate and after exam week she would be kicked out of the dorms. She felt distant from Bethany and Wayne, who'd announced they were pregnant again. And she had no clue what was supposed to come next—this summer, the fall, the following five or ten or forty years. It seemed a very serious conversation for a weekday afternoon.

Darren nodded along. At a red light he reached over and patted Rachel's thigh.

She lifted his hand and put it back on the steering wheel.

“All I want right now is ice cream,” she said. “Or, later, I want ice cream. Right now let’s buy a newspaper and read the comics to each other in funny voices.”

They ended up in Benson Heights. Darren let Rachel out at coffee shop then went and parked a couple blocks away at his apartment. They sat in overstuffed chairs and did the thing with the comic strips, then for the next hour Darren read a physiology textbook while Rachel tried drafting a poem about the timber cargoes on Lake Superior. The wind had picked up outside, and occasionally the door blew open though no one was there. Eventually Darren fell asleep in his chair and woke up with a start. Rachel got up and threw her poem in the trash.

“Darren, I should thank you,” she said. “You were a good listener today. I’m sorry I’m always going back and forth.”

“It’s okay,” Darren said. “I’ll get the car and let’s go for ice cream.”

After fifteen minutes he hadn’t returned, so Rachel stuffed the newspaper in her bag and went outside to wait. The sky had gotten dark and the vinyl awning over the coffee shop ruffled with the wind. Rachel walked back to find Darren in the parking lot of the Drakemore Arms, standing before his car with the hood propped.

“Won’t start,” he said. “Alternator’s shot.”

“The what?”

“It’s the piece that alternates the current and connects the spark charger,” Darren said. “Sometimes they short out in the humidity. I’d call Triple-A but that storm’s coming.”

It seemed suspicious. The car had been running fine earlier—no clicks or dings or



anything to signal trouble. And really, Darren knew nothing about cars and shouldn't have pretended he did.

"You're lying," Rachel said. "I wanted ice cream."

"There's ice cream in my apartment."

"No, you can go away now."

"What does that mean?"

"Good-bye, Darren. Don't call me. Whatever I do from now on, it's without you."

He watched her for a long time. He was sniffing and his chest heaved in an embarrassing manner. Rachel stepped forward and hugged him. "But I'm very serious. This is good-bye," she said, and she urged him away to his apartment building.

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Rachel stayed in the parking lot. Black clouds had gathered to the south. The wind blew in gusts and fat raindrops began dotting the pavement.

Her phone beeped from her tote bag and she took it out ready to send Darren an angry reply. But instead, her home screen showed an exclamation point inside a triangle, and beside that an emergency storm alert. TAKE SHELTER NOW. CHECK LOCAL MEDIA. Rachel lowered the hood of Darren's car and went inside to her vacant spec unit.

She watched from the window as the trees rustled in the wind. The rain came down hard like buckshot, and dirt and sand pelted the glass even there on the fourth floor. Far off was the circular drone of a public warning system. Across the parking lot, a large branch cleaved from a tree and landed on the roof of a minivan.

Rachel stepped back and tripped over something—her fabric strap, the one she'd picked out of the ditch. The brass buckle kicked up and struck her on the chin, and she

got to her feet and swung the strap like a discus thrower, intending to launch it through the window, but her release was off and it whizzed through the doorway into the bedroom, bursting away a chunk of drywall. And then Rachel had a dark idea.

She carried the milk crate into the bedroom and examined the closet ductwork. It was high up, but not so high she couldn't secure the strap. She flung the buckle over the duct and pulled down with both hands to see that it would hold. The open end of the strap was frayed and she put it through the buckle at an angle, twisted it into a loop and slipped it over her head. Then she ratcheted the buckle and stepped off the crate.

In short time she awoke on her stomach. Around her were bits of plaster and brick. She was in the center of the living room. Looking up she saw the treetops across the parking lot and white sparks from a severed power line. The sun was out. All was calm, surprisingly. She reached up and released the buckle, and in doing so saw a trail of blood running down her forearm and knew she hadn't died. But that didn't explain what had happened to the wall.