

TWENTY SUMMERS

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A thesis submitted to Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

Baltimore, Maryland
May, 2014

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Abstract

A collection of stories.

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Twenty Summers

The Bricks and the Coopers spent a weekend every July at the Coopers' summer home in Cape Cod. Summer number eighteen—Wendy Cooper was counting—was the hottest yet, with humid air so thick it felt exotic. As a joke, for the Bricks' arrival, Wendy bought leis at the Dollar Store and put on Bob Marley. Her sweat-damp, moody daughters tried to talk her out of it. But Wendy saw patients every day who endured terrible discomfort, and no matter how her heart broke, Wendy never complained, not with them or about them. Being unreligious, she placed her faith in positivity. Heat was nothing.

In summers past the Coopers and Bricks had encountered all kinds of weather. Rain that drizzled and rain that poured, breezy days that never reached sixty degrees, warm wind that kicked up sandstorms at the beach, and the heavy waves and anxiety of approaching hurricanes. Usually the worst weather made for the best memories. Like the day, stuck indoors, they'd showed the kids their old favorite movie: *Animal House*. Gary Brick, who'd gone to rent it, had forgotten it contained naked breasts, and so he'd jumped up to hide the screen with an open newspaper, which he peered over, shamelessly, to the kids' delight. The kids had been young then. Now the youngest of their six combined children—three each—was 21.

Tonight the kids had walked to a bar for a live band and air conditioning. The parents stayed on the deck. It was hot, and the house had no air conditioning, but the idea of a bar in the summer in Cape Cod was unappealing. Tourists, noise, expensive drinks. Here frogs chirped in the bushes, and hydrangeas the size of headlights glowed in the yard. There was a breeze, too, though not enough. Wendy's husband Rich set up a standing fan with an extension cord from the garage. The glue-like air the fan pushed around smelled of salt and eucalyptus. In the center of the scalloped glass table, a citronella candle burned in a wide glass jar.

Jayne and Gary Brick were tag-team talking, once again, about Gina's wedding. The wedding took place six months ago, on a snowy New Years' Eve at a golf club in Connecticut. It had also been the main topic of conversation last summer.

"Did we tell you about the light fixture?" Jayne sat up in her chair, her elbows propped on its arms. In one of her hands she held a wine glass, from whose stem dangled a marker in the shape of a turquoise seahorse. Jayne had pale blonde hair, expensively dyed, and equally pale blue eyes. In the sun she wore wide-brimmed hats, long sleeves, and SPF 50. Today, at the beach, she'd claimed her skin was burning through her bathing suit. She seemed to take pride in her skin's sensitivity, as if, like the princess's toward the pea, it signified royalty. Once she'd decided to leave the beach, after only forty-five minutes, everyone followed.

"I don't think so," Wendy said. She remembered the parallel strings of lights suspended and glimmering above the dance floor. They'd reminded her of a whale's tail, bowl-shaped at the bottom and arcing up into a fan. "It was beautiful."

"Thanks, Wen," Gary said.

Both Wendy and Rich must have looked puzzled, because Jayne said, “Gary designed the fixture. You knew that.”

“I hadn’t known that,” Wendy said.

“I could have used your help, Rich,” Gary said. “Especially with the extension cords.”

Rich, an engineer and handyman, smiled at the compliment.

It was unbelievable to Wendy that at one point, in college, Gary and Rich had had the same puffy haircut, had worn the same outfits—turtlenecks and bell-bottom jeans—and had been inseparable. Now they were two different species of middle-aged. Gary was jolly and tall, with a pleasant slackness in his cheeks and chin that allowed him a cartoonish charm. Rich was diminutive, muscular, always so quiet. The loudest thing about him was his nose. Which Eleanor had inherited, though luckily not Wendy’s other daughters.

Gary continued. “Some prospective bride toured the ballroom the day after the wedding and *loved* my light fixture. So Pierre, our wedding planner, gives her my name and information! For months I’ve got this crazy bride calling me, emailing me, offering me thousands of dollars to do the same fixture for her. I’m telling you, I could start a business. I could retire on this.”

“I was seriously getting jealous,” Jayne said.

Wendy imagined a blond 25-year-old bride calling Rich every day. If only the object of her jealousy were so compact. A person! A skinny one who probably didn’t eat much. But no. Wendy had to envy mountains. Ski slopes. The Appalachian Trail.

Of course she envied Jayne, too, not just mountains. But that was standard envy, the kind expected in the course of any woman's life. Jayne didn't have to work or shop the sale rack. She and Gary lived in Stamford, Connecticut; he worked in finance in New York. Gary was great. Wendy had always liked him, back when he was Rich's roommate, at Boston University. In fact, she and Rich had set him up with Jayne, one of Wendy's fellow nursing students.

"You've got an eye," Rich said to Gary. His tone was warm but patronizing. Last night he'd said to Wendy in bed, "It's kind of sad." "What?" she'd snapped, her heart pounding wildly. "The wedding is all they have, all they care about." Wendy couldn't think what to say. She was too shocked by the fact that he was talking to her, and so casually. Would he want to have sex with her, too? She'd do it. Then Rich added, before turning off the light, "And to think, it's *over*."

Now Rich wanted to change the subject. Still leaning back, he clasped his hands at his chest. "Charlie's moves were pretty magnificent, weren't they. How is Charlie?" He was referring to "Shout," the song at the reception during which Jayne's father Charlie fell on his back as he tried to get low, then decided to stay there: arms and legs wiggling like a crab's, wild and weightless. A crowd had gathered.

Jayne winced. Clearly, she was shocked. Wendy wished she herself were shocked too, but sadly, this was typical.

Gary spoke first. "Rich, you know... Jayne's father passed away."

"Rich!" Wendy repeated, hoping to disguise her shame as mere surprise. She had told him about Charlie back in February, right after Jayne had called with the news.

Jayne looked at her husband, then the floor. Wendy looked away, toward the backyard, where her pale hydrangeas, which were never blue enough, stood next to Rich's new shed. He'd built it in June, and the wooden walls, still unpainted, looked yellow and raw.

"Oh, God. I'm sorry, Jayne," Rich said. "Wendy..." His voice trailed off, and took on a questioning tone.

"What?" Wendy's voice was sharp, but she stopped herself. She wanted to yell, *I told you! I told you I told you I told you so many times!*

Rich had pressed his right hand against his heart, and the other lay limply in his lap. "Jayne, I'm very sorry. I don't know how I—but of course I knew, and I... I thought of you a lot. I know how difficult it is. He was young."

"It's okay, Rich," Gary said, his hand on Jayne's knee. "Unbelievable how we're at that age, all of a sudden. The losses do seem to pile up, to rise up. Sometimes it feels like a tsunami, doesn't it?"

Gary was being so kind. Wendy's recognition of his kindness carried with it a deep sadness, as well as a fresh wave of horror at the old man's death, which had frightened even Wendy, a nurse. She had seen death arrive in so many ways: expected or not, early, or far later than anyone could have dreamed. Charlie was a small, thin guy, like Rich, and he'd had a minor heart attack while getting into the shower. An attack that he would have survived, had his arm or hand not fallen against the shower's dial, which he dragged all the way to left as he collapsed. To the hottest setting. The burns from the water drained the last of his energy, and probably engulfed what will to live he had left.

Jayne, who talked to him every afternoon, had gone over to find him when he didn't answer her call.

Now Jayne stood and walked into the house, through the sliding screen doors. "I just need a minute," she said. Gary moved to follow.

Wendy whispered, "Gary. Could I? Please?"

He paused and opened his mouth. By then Wendy was standing. Gary nodded.

Jayne was standing in the dining room, beside the collage of photos that filled one wall. All the pictures had been taken in this house or at the beach. Most of the frames were plain wood, some were painted white or cornflower blue. Nearly half featured Jayne, Gary, and their three children—the two blond boys and dark-haired Gina.

"Jayne. I'm sorry," Wendy said. She gave her friend a long hug.

As they separated, Jayne tilted her head at Wendy. Jayne's eyes were filled with tears. In private last night, not long after the Bricks arrived, Wendy had asked Jayne how she was doing. She'd said, "Okay, but it's hard," and then had smiled.

Now Jayne was crying—for Charlie, for herself, and, it seemed to Wendy, for Wendy too. It was the way that Jayne implored her with her wet eyes, and did not try to shield them from her. Jayne knew certain things about the last few years. She and Wendy spoke on the phone twice a month. Jayne knew that Rich spent long weekends and vacation days on paid group excursions, during which he refused to use his cell phone. He'd climbed Mount Rainier and hiked part of the Appalachian Trail. Jayne knew about Rich's sudden love for country music—the Zac Brown Band, Toby Keith, Taylor Swift—but not that, since Wendy didn't share it, he'd bought himself an iPod which he often kept on during meals. It had something to do with missing their children, Wendy

assumed, and yet he never picked up the phone to call them himself. He took days to return their emails. Instead he texted his trekking friends, a group of guys mostly in their mid-twenties, to plan weekend training trips in the Berkshires or fantasize about future goals, such as Mount Kilimanjaro. Wendy read his messages sometimes, when he went for a jog or while he was mowing the lawn.

“Didn’t you tell him, Wendy?” Jayne asked.

The house was hot. Wendy’s cheeks, after so much wine, felt as though they were melting. A new fear bloomed inside her. If her marriage to Rich was in jeopardy, if they reeked of sourness and strife, would Jayne and Gary continue to return for these reunions? Irrationally, for this moment of exposure, she blamed Jayne. Jayne and her brother had hosted a family-only memorial service for Charlie, with no wake. Rich would have remembered about Charlie if he’d been allowed to participate.

“I’m nearly sure I did,” Wendy said, looking into her glass. She felt ludicrous as she said this, and yet hopeful. Let Jayne think Wendy is an uncaring bitch who might have forgotten to tell her husband tragic news. Let Jayne think her husband—or Wendy herself—suffers from early-onset dementia. But not that her husband just doesn’t listen anymore.

Jayne turned away and fanned her face with her hand. Her nails were painted pale pink. “Why don’t we just blame it on the heat. It is *hot*.” She was trying, kindly, to erase this moment, but she succeeded only in shaming Wendy further. All weekend Wendy had drowned in a deluge of these comments. The beach is hot. The deck is hot. The house is stifling.

“I’m *really* sorry we don’t have air conditioning,” Wendy said, and watched with a twinge of satisfaction as Jayne’s smile collapsed into a look of surprise and confusion.

Almost immediately she wished she could take it back.

*

Half an hour later the kids came home, sweating from their walk, laughing, and telling stories from earlier summers. At the bar they’d run into a lifeguard the girls had once admired. Back then, to get his attention, they’d swam far past buoys and pretended to lose their younger siblings among the crowd of umbrellas and beachgoers. Tonight they’d approached him at the bar, one last time, and laughingly apologized. He was still cute, they said, and had his own family now.

By the time she went to bed, Wendy was no longer worried. She was looking forward to tomorrow. The new day held the possibility of cooler weather, at least in the morning. She wanted them all to go to the beach. To chat under umbrellas and swim and play Backgammon and Pinochle. She set an alarm for seven, at which point she’d cook breakfast and bang a few noisy dishes.

But someone was whispering, moving, even before her alarm. It was Jayne and Ted, in the bedroom across from Wendy’s. Wendy heard the sound of a zipper, footsteps in the hall, the opening and closing of the fridge. When Wendy emerged from her room in her nightgown, Jayne, in a red tank top and khaki shorts, sunglasses pushed into her hair, said they were heading home.

“What?” Wendy said. “But it’s going to be nice today!” Never before had the Bricks left so early. “What about the meat?”

Sunday was Jayne and Ted's night to cook. Their ten pounds of filet mignon were sitting in Wendy's overflow freezer in the garage.

"You guys eat it tonight. It's just this heat!" Jayne said. "Ted couldn't sleep, and he's got a big meeting tomorrow." Gary, their three children, and Gina's husband were walking toward the garage, duffel bags slung over their shoulders. Gary smiled silently at Wendy. They all looked dressed-up. The four men in polos and loafers, Gina in a sundress and strappy metallic sandals.

"Rich does too," Wendy lied. "I'll let him sleep." She feared trying to wake him. What if he ignored her? She gave each Brick a longer hug, for him.

When the Bricks were gone, Wendy carried five sets of sheets and eight towels to the laundry room in the basement. Her daughters were still asleep down there. Her noise woke them, briefly, and they groaned and turned over. The smell in the basement was awful: body odor, brine, with a slime to it, like deli meat gone bad. Seven adults had slept in this windowless room. Pull-out sofas and air mattresses were positioned across the floor like Tetris blocks. On the plasterboard walls hung Disney posters and more beach photographs in clear plastic frames.

After a few minutes, Eleanor, Wendy's oldest, came into the laundry room with an armful of pink and white striped sheets. She hadn't washed off last night's eye makeup. Grainy black pouches, like smears of crayon, sat under each eye. Though 29, she was still the neediest child. Wendy loved and pitied her for this.

"Oh my god, this basement is *so* disgusting." Even her most dutiful daughter, rubbing salt in Wendy's wound.

"Did you have a good time this weekend?"

Eleanor shrugged, hugging the blankets. “Of course. Did you?”

“I always do.”

“That’s a weird answer.”

“How is it weird?”

“It just is. Where do I put these? They’re still sweaty.”

When Eleanor went upstairs, Wendy composed an email on her phone, to Jayne. She was fretting that Jayne hadn’t emailed yet, or posted photos. They were both now on Facebook. *Great weekend, J! Marvelous to see you. Did the kids survive all right? No heat stroke? Any pictures to share? xoxo, Wen*

*

Wendy cleaned the fridge and threw out the worst of the junk food, wiped the counters and island and dining room table, vacuumed, and scrubbed the toilets, and still Jayne hadn’t replied. If someone were to blame for this, it was Rich. She decided to attempt to talk to him.

Rich, headphones in, was reorganizing the garage, which was large for a one-car. On finger-sized wooden pegs, spaced two feet apart along the side walls, hung bags and deflated floats and life jackets. Boogie boards leaned on the walls between them. Tall metal shelves at the back held toolboxes—Rich had multiple—along with sponges, soaps, bungee cords, and stacks of canned soda and bottled water. Oil stains formed a galaxy-like mass in the center of the cement floor.

“It’s fine,” he said to Wendy, after removing one earbud. “It’s just the heat.”

“It’s been hot before.”

He pushed a broom across the floor, saying nothing.

“I definitely told you that, about Charlie.”

He shrugged, implying that maybe Wendy hadn't. “I'm sorry. I did apologize.”

“I told you so many times!”

He swept a pile of sand and dirt into the dustbin and left the garage, presumably to dump it into the woods at the edge of their yard.

Wendy checked her phone. No messages. She imagined Jayne, still sitting in the car, clutching her phone with both hands, head tilted down as her husband stared ahead at the forest-lined highway. Wendy's husband, too, was off in the woods. And within hours her three children would be traveling by car, train, or plane to Cambridge, New York, Baltimore.

Rich reentered the garage, dustbin empty, though still held carefully, as if it weren't.

“I want air conditioning,” Wendy said. He wasn't looking at her.

Maybe he'd turned up his headphones.

“I want central air. Here.” They didn't have it at their house in Ashland. Back home, during heat waves, they slept on old couches in the basement.

He walked to the furthest corner, by the extra fridge and the bikes with their time-flattened tires.

Wendy took out her phone and wrote an email, addressed to everyone who'd been present this weekend, adults and children. *PS – We just decided that we're getting air conditioning!* Rich's phone was in his back pocket. Wendy had seen the outline as he'd walked away into the woods. She listened for his phone's three-note beep, but just then

he turned on the air compressor, to fill the tires of his bike. So he was going to go on a long ride on the Rail Trail this afternoon. Would he invite their daughters?

*

When Rich and Wendy had gone Cape house shopping twenty years before—they'd left the kids with Wendy's mother, and stayed at cheap motels on Saturday nights, ordering pizza or indulging in off-season discounts at waterfront restaurants—they had fallen in love with a living room. The location of the house was a compromise, at fifteen minutes from the beach by car, but the living room had a cathedral ceiling, a skylight, and a storm window facing the backyard: a clearing within woods and wildflowers. It also had a functioning brick fireplace, whose mantel the owners had lined with mason jars and hobnail vases filled with color-sorted sea glass.

The room was, of all the homes in which Wendy had ever lived, her favorite room to read in. But, because of its high ceiling, it would cost as much to air condition as the whole rest of the house.

Her guilt trip had worked on Rich, after all. He spoke to her that week, back in Ashland. "Do you have any contacts," he asked, "you know, for the air conditioning?" She said no, and spoke in first person singular. "I'm not in a rush." Days later he handed her a list.

Jayne and Gary, however, took days to respond. Finally Jayne wrote: *wow, guys!* and Gary wrote: *don't do it for us!* Wendy thought for a while and days later wrote: *I'd do anything for you guys.*

Eventually Rich and Wendy did fight over the AC. He didn't want to pay the doubled cost for the living room. Instead, he wanted French doors between it and

kitchen, to isolate the cold, expensive air when necessary. They just wouldn't use the living room in the heat, he said.

“Every time someone comes in from the garage, carrying suitcases, or just a beer from the fridge, they'll have to go through that sliding door,” Wendy said.

“We can move the fridge to the basement, and use the front and back doors to get in and out.”

“What about watching TV?”

“We'll buy one for the kitchen. Didn't you want one there anyway?” AC was really for sleeping and cooking, he argued.

They stalled. There was no rush. Many months remained until summer. But in January, before they'd signed a contract, the engineering firm where Rich had worked for twenty-eight years downsized and laid him off. Wendy didn't know whether he'd seen it coming; they did not discuss work. He was given ten months of severance, but Wendy worried he would have trouble finding something new. Despite all his hiking he looked closer to retirement than he was, with the gray-blond hair at his temples and the deep straining wrinkles around his eyes and mouth. Losing weight after 40, as Rich had done, benefited the body immensely, but not the face. From certain angles he looked skeletal.

Wendy feared he would change his mind about air conditioning, but he didn't. Now even she didn't want the expensive option. So they—well, he—would be installing their own French doors.

They drove to the Cape on a Friday night in March, silent for the two-hour ride. He had one headphone in, listening to country, while she read a mystery novel with a battery-powered booklight. On Saturday they woke early, so Rich could start installing

the doors. She was reading on the couch, sipping coffee, when he yelled that he needed her help.

She held planks while he measured them, centered them, drilled holes or twisted in screws. She caught him making a mistake lining up the second door handle with the first. By accident, he hammered and bent the base of a flush bolt, so he had to drive to Hyannis for a new one. She came, because he mentioned cheeseburgers—he deserved one, he felt—and she wanted one, too. They didn't chat at lunch, except to say how good the burgers were, but when they finally finished their project at 7 PM, they high-fived. After pizza, during which they watched basketball, they collapsed on separate couches.

Eleanor called while they were watching a rerun of *ER*. Wendy decided to put her on speakerphone. As Wendy described the project, Rich interrupted her, his description louder, faster. He was excited. Wendy could tell they were boring their daughter, but Eleanor obliged them. "Sounds awesome," she said. "I can't wait to see it."

Maybe it was that idea—of guests coming to witness and admire their hard work—that sparked it. Maybe it was the unacknowledged but indisputable sense of shared satisfaction, the promise it held for the two of them and their marriage. In the next few months, Wendy and Rich repainted the basement and bedrooms, re-did the front walk in flagstone, and rebuilt the walls surrounding the outdoor shower. For eighteen years its wooden planks had slowly shriveled, leaving ever-widening gaps that guests, women in particular, worried and complained about. They dismantled its walls and rebuilt them with thick wooden slats pressed so close together that no light, let alone eyes, would sneak through.

Rich seemed much happier to Wendy. He spoke to her, not of work or news or love, but of projects and ideas for more projects. Once he asked her, in May, to shower outside with him. She didn't want to—she was comfortable, reading on the couch, already clean—but she felt she should, so she did.

*

The next summer, now that Rich and Wendy had air conditioning, the forecast predicted perpetual rain for the weekend of the Bricks' visit, with temperatures in the low seventies.

Friday was Rich and Wendy's turn to cook. Rich grilled chicken on the porch, Gary beside him with an umbrella. Jayne helped Wendy in the kitchen. Jayne had brought her new favorite wine: effervescent Pinot Noir. Wendy, who'd had a glass or two before they arrived, proposed a toast.

"To great friends," she said, "reuniting in a great house!" She'd already shown Jayne the basement, the bedrooms, the French doors, and the outdoor shower. *It's bigger than the last one*, she'd said, as the two of them huddled outside in the rain. *Big enough for two, if you know what I mean*. This made Jayne laugh; she rubbed Wendy on the shoulder. "May it never end." Now Wendy raised her glass, but Jayne lowered hers and said, "*Shh.*"

"Along those lines," Jayne whispered. "Gina is going to make an announcement tomorrow." She sipped her wine and raised her eyebrows.

"What?" Wendy was confused.

"Gina's... *you know*," Jayne whispered. She placed a palm on her stomach.

"*Oh*," Wendy said. "Wow."

“And can you *believe* poor Gina’s going to be sleeping in that basement all weekend?” Jayne laughed.

A swirl of surprise and offense and jealousy enveloped Wendy. Also, a sense of imminent loss. Her friend was becoming a grandparent. As she hugged Jayne, Wendy let herself cry a little, hoping it might be mistaken for happiness.

“Do you think they’ll come next year, maybe get a hotel?” Wendy asked.

Jayne shrugged. “Well, who knows. Gina and Matt will make an announcement tomorrow night. You can tell Rich—how could you not? But try not to tell the kids, so, you know, they’ll be surprised.”

As Wendy fell asleep that night, mind spinning with wine, she couldn’t help crying. Not in loud, gulping jags but little hiccups, which Rich must have heard, or felt.

He asked her what was wrong. Though she was ashamed of her feelings, she explained them. He said, “Mm hm,” and fell asleep.

The next day it rained and the kids played cards. Gina made her announcement. No one drank as much as usual, perhaps in solidarity with the mom-to-be. The next morning, rain still falling, the Bricks again left early, with breakfast for the road.

*

A week later, Rich got a job offer.

He got the call Friday afternoon, while he and Wendy were alone at the beach, reading under an umbrella. Wendy had felt down since the previous weekend, filled with a mild panic that resembled grief. She’d been emailing Jayne, Ted, and all the kids with purposeful questions and confident assertions—*who’s excited to have a third generation at*

reunion #20? #20! Let me know if I should look into hotels. Their responses were carefully calibrated to avoid any promise. *Haha*, they wrote, or *Lol. Thanks again for hosting, love.*

“Oh, honey,” she said, and rubbed Rich’s knee. They wrote a text to their kids. Eleanor called as soon as she received it.

“How are you going to celebrate?” Eleanor asked.

Rich could start as early as Monday, and he still had three months of severance pay. They discussed Hawaii, or putting central air in their house in Ashland. And then the light bulb moment: an extension on their Cape house. A fourth bedroom, for Gina and Matt and their new baby. Of course it would also come in handy whenever their own children settled down.

This was the happiest Wendy had felt since their friends had left last weekend. They drove back to their house, just to look, and imagine the extension, though it was only 1 PM on the most gorgeous kind of beach day.

*

They emailed the architect’s sketches to Jayne and Ted, and all the kids. *Just wait until you see it in July!* was the message’s text. Every weekend they drove down to monitor its progress.

Then, on a Friday in February, a rare blizzard buried Massachusetts, dumping three and a half feet of snow on Ashland and two on the Cape. Rich, worried about ice dams and pipes, wanted to leave work and drive down. Wendy thought driving during the storm was too dangerous. “If something bad happens we can fix it, okay? We have the money.”

Rich was cheap, though he wouldn't admit it. "Not everything that breaks *can* be fixed," he said. "Patched up, maybe, at great cost, but it might never be the same."

He'd go whether or not Wendy joined him. There was nothing she could do. She couldn't let him drive alone, tense and angry, on snowy roads.

But as she packed, the governor came on television. He declared a state of emergency and banned vehicles from public roads. The last time this happened was during the Blizzard of 1978, the year Rich and Wendy were married. They'd both gotten a week off work, and it felt like a second honeymoon. Making pancakes, playing cards, taking long walks through their neighborhood in snowsuits and boots.

This time, trapped in their house for a day, Wendy cooked and baked and tried to read, her eyes gliding idly over the pages. Rich built a bookshelf for the new room at the Cape. Alone in his workshop in the basement, he blasted the History channel. Wendy hated the solemn drama of the narrators' voices, which reached her, scratchy and indecipherable, through the basement door and the floor under her feet.

At 6 AM the next morning the ban was lifted. They drove in dark silence to the Cape. With snow still on the roads the trip took four hours.

Rich set up his ladder in the front yard first, probably right on top of Wendy's hydrangeas. The top of the ladder was as high as the base of the roof. He stood on the second step from the top, his feet parallel and pointing toward the house, and started raking. The rake reminded Wendy of a pole vaulter's pole. At first she watched in boots and her jacket from the front steps, but at last, too cold, she went inside and buried herself in blankets. The house took a long time to warm up. When Rich had been at it for two hours without a break, she put on her boots again and went to beg him. His

cheeks were bright red, his ski jacket's shoulders wet with snow. "I'm almost done with this section," he yelled. She couldn't tell if he was wearing headphones. The once snow-covered roof now looked partially bald, like a head in the process of being shaved, its fluffy whiteness peeled away in strips.

Another hour passed before Rich came inside. "So much snow!" he shouted. "So much work!" He did have his headphones in. Powder from his boots spilled off the mat onto the hardwood floor. He took off his coat and snow pants and hung them over a dining room chair—their old set, the first they'd bought after their wedding, stained and scratched by so many years of use. The cold had reversed the colors of Rich's face. His nose, cheeks, forehead and chin were a frightening bright purple-red. His lips were dry and whitish. Even the whites of his eyes were shot with pink.

"You wore your headphones?" Wendy said.

"Sure," he said. "It gets boring up there!" But he did not seem bored at all. He was exhilarated.

Wendy reheated his lunch, tomato soup and grilled cheese, and sat back down on the couch. He sat close beside her, instead of at the dining room table or kitchen island. "I'm cold!" he said, as he slid his leg to touch hers. His hand shook as he raised his spoon.

"Should we rent a movie?" Wendy asked. It was 3 PM.

"Maybe later," he said. "I'm feeling good. We should paint."

"What?" Wendy said. They only had one room to do, a room that had suffered some changes in the process of building the extension. And when that was done? They

were about to reach the end of their to-do list. “You deserve to relax. We could go out for burgers.”

He shook his head, and began to eat faster. “We still need to do the guest room.”

“Why not tomorrow?” Wendy asked.

“Why not today?”

“I’m not going to help,” Wendy said. She was resolved. “I’m too tired.”

“*You’re* tired?” he said. “Ha!” He took a last bite of his sandwich—far too big—and struggled to swallow. “You can go rent us a movie, for after.” He raised his eyebrows. *After.*

When Wendy got back from the store, country music blasted through the house, something about summer and the perfect pair of skin-tight jeans. She called to Rich. No answer. She walked upstairs.

Half the room was painted, and he wasn’t there. Hm, Wendy wondered, he must have walked over to a neighbor’s. Later Eleanor would say to her, *What neighbors, Mom? What neighbors?* Their old boombox, plugged into the wall, sat on the floor playing the Cape’s country music station. Wendy turned it off. As she walked downstairs she called Rich’s cell phone. It rang on the kitchen table.

An hour later she would find him outside in the snow. She’d never find out why he went outside again, why he climbed his ladder. Maybe he’d forgotten to clear off part of the roof, or wanted to inspect his work. Maybe he suspected the wind had dumped snow off the trees. Wendy would never know, but she had a feeling he’d been happy.

His body lay face-up, a foot or two beneath the level surface of the snow. A patchy veil of white powder covered most of his face, and snow had blown across his

dark jacket, his snow pants, his boots. And yet—not a single clump of snow had settled on his nose. Still the color of berries, his bare bright nose pointed straight up toward the sky. After she sank to her knees in the snow and after she called 911, Wendy allowed herself one little laugh. May this never happen to poor Eleanor, she thought.

The same afternoon, she'd find out soon, Gina Brick went into labor.

*

At the funeral reception Wendy took tequila shots with her children. Not that Rich would ever have done such a thing, but their jaws hurt from smiling and talking and this was more fun than Motrin. Afterward, as the tingle traveled up and down inside her, Wendy took a glass of wine and went to find Gary and Jayne. They were sitting in folding chairs in the living room.

“Beautiful slide show,” Jayne said, hands resting on her gray wool skirt.

“Thanks,” Wendy smiled. She'd made a whole section for their reunions, one from each of the nineteen summers. “How's Gina doing, and baby Jackson?”

“Really well,” Jayne said. She had a slide show of her own, on her phone. Gina sweaty-haired and red-faced, in a hospital gown, holding her squinting purple baby. Matt, carrying a bundle in his arms, walking out through the large sliding doors of the hospital.

Wendy was feeling the tequila shot. She couldn't help but smile. It was perverse, she knew, but sitting with Gary and Jayne, she felt happy.

“I know I should be sad,” Wendy said, “but...”

“No, no!” Jayne interrupted. “Funerals are for happy memories.”

“Exactly,” Wendy said. “So let's toast. To next summer!” She raised her wine glass, and noticed it was nearly empty. She'd need to refill it.

“And the new generation,” Jayne added, lifting her plastic cup of Coke.

“And to a new house with plenty of room for it!” Wendy said. Her friends gave her a strange look, and so she laughed. Her laugh was loud. At first no one joined her, and with a pang she thought of Rich. How soft his laugh had been, how mysterious, really. Then she had a terrible thought. Eleanor kept offering to move home, so the house wouldn’t feel empty. Wendy had said she’d think about it. But she’d spent two nights alone already and the house hadn’t felt empty at all. Now she knew why. Of course—Rich was so *quiet*. No one but her knew how quiet he really was.

This revelation made her laugh harder. She was close to drunk. She laughed so hard her eyes watered. She decided then that she’d say no to Eleanor. Emphatically. *No*, she’d say. You need to live. Stay in the city, Eleanor. Be with your friends.

Yes, she thought to herself. Be with your friends.

Just then someone—a nurse, from work—shouted Wendy’s name and came toward her. Wendy took a deep breath, stood up, and said to Jayne and Gary, “They’re coming, right? Matt and Gina and Jackson? Next summer?”

She never heard Jayne’s answer. And that was fine. She didn’t need to. There would be a summer number twenty; Wendy was sure of it.

Reins

When Anna and Matthew arrived at the *estancia*, in the evening, the power was out. The main building's exterior was cheery, and looked bright even as the sun set over the fields. Its paint was sugar-crystal white, textured and pristine, with a foot of crimson paint at the base and a flat red roof; two crimson columns framed the rounded front doors. For all the cute brightness of its exterior—which reminded Matthew of a drugstore valentine—walking inside revealed that there were barely any windows. The floors were a deep brown hardwood, and candles in pewter candlesticks on claw-foot side tables flickered against the pale ceilings and all the dark furniture. A collection of copper vases lined the mantel over the living room fireplace, and seemed to emit their own hazy fuzz of light.

Anna and Matthew were the second group to arrive for their two-night stay. It was a package deal, with bottomless Argentine barbecue, views of vineyards and soy fields, and one day of vigorous horseback riding. In the kitchen, Alejandro introduced them to the cook, a pregnant woman with cherry-pink cheeks who kept lifting the bottom of her apron to wipe her forehead. “No air conditioning right now,” Alejandro said. “Very sorry. It was a big storm yesterday.” He reassured them that the night would

get cooler, and that the power would return in no time. The kitchen smelled like burnt sugar, and through a window they could see a large grill sending up smoke.

In the dining room, another group was already eating. It was a family of four from the Netherlands, with two daughters in their late teens, sitting around a circular table lit by tall white candles. All four were blond and they all spoke excellent English. The mother, Agnes, had a more halting manner than her husband and daughters, and piercing eyes that became even more so when she paused. Agnes asked Anna and Matthew to sit with them. Her invitation was calm, without cheer or insistence. “If you would like,” she added, stressing the first word. “You have,” she tilted her head, “traveled far.”

“Well...” Matthew wanted to say no. He was here to spend time with Anna, and he did not want to be confronted, for the length of an entire dinner, with this stunning vision of what they would never have. Six months ago, Anna had miscarried. After the loss she’d decided she no longer wanted children, biological or otherwise, even though, years before, when they’d begun their long stretch of fertility treatments, they’d agreed to adopt if the treatments didn’t work. But she’d changed her mind. And what could he do but support her, after what she’d been through? He glanced nervously at her now, hoping she’d be the one to say no.

She was smiling, nodding, her ponytail swinging. “Yes! Right, Matthew?” she said.

Matthew smiled too. He wanted whatever she wanted, he reminded himself.

“Absolutely.”

*

After dessert, Anna wanted to swim. The Dutch sisters, Nel and Josina, were going, and they begged Anna, though their pleas were unnecessary.

The guests had carried their candles and wine to the patio, which offered benches, chairs, a hammock, and a view of the grounds. Next to the patio was the pool, large and rectangular, with a diving board that glowed white over the black glimmering water. Beyond the pool, the short, close rows of soy stretched like a striped carpet toward the dark horizon.

Before jumping in, Anna imagined the weather in Connecticut. The spicy cold would make her nose tingle. There would be the smell of ice. A dryness in her fingers and lips would make them pale and scratchy. Her mother had emailed last night and said it might be a white Christmas.

And here Anna was, at 10 PM, wearing her black strapless two-piece, her body already tan from their time in Buenos Aires. Thanks to the lack of power the pool was dark, so she didn't worry about the extra weight still at her waist.

In the water her body was buoyant. Her hair had gotten long. She liked to emerge from underwater like a seal, so that her heavy wet hair streamed down her back. She did this over and over, at the edge of the deep end, then a few water somersaults in each direction. The last time she'd done a water somersault had to have been ten years ago, on Cape Cod with her parents.

The Dutch sisters were engaged in an exhibition: they dove, flipped, and cannonball-ed off the diving board. Anna assumed Matthew was watching them, enjoying a cigar and another glass of wine and the sight of the blond girls' bodies as they arced and splashed. Nel, the older of the two, who were both in college, could flip with

her legs perfectly straight. She'd point her toes, bend her torso over her thighs; then, as she turned, her vertebrae strained against her skin, catching what little light remained in the air.

Anna finally climbed out, and looked at Matthew. He was not staring at the blond girls. He was deep in conversation with their parents. He nodded and held his cigar, legs crossed widely, one foot resting across the other knee.

Someone jumped off the board—Anna didn't know which sister—and there was a creak of the springs, the plank's bounce, and a splash in the water. Anna glanced down at herself, at the glaze of pool water streaming down her arms, legs, and stomach. The water made the material of her black suit look rich and inky. For the first time she wondered if the weight she hadn't lost suited her. She liked the way her body felt right now. She was convex.

Her entire life her stomach had been the opposite, and this fact had been a source of great pride. Now her hipbones, which used to resemble little horns, were lost inside her. Tonight she felt unfazed by this loss, glad even. This was the first time she'd worn a bathing suit since before she was pregnant. She felt fuller, more whole and feminine. As she walked around the rim of the pool she pressed a hand to her stomach. Maybe her body knew best. She was here, after all, in Argentina, and she was very happy about that.

She placed her feet at the edge of the board, bounced, and raised her arms. Her fingers were precisely straight and her hands overlapped. Her dive was long and low. Afterward she stayed underwater for as long as she could, gliding, paddling her feet, arms outstretched.

*

Back in their room, on the bed, Anna's body was sticky. Her hair was wet and had clumped into thick strands like seaweed.

They were kissing. Matthew had to get up. He glanced around the room without turning his head.

"Oh, babe," he said. "Your wet towel. It's on my suit." He'd brought the suit, new, and she'd brought a green silk dress for Christmas in Iguazu. Anna murmured an apology. "It's okay. I'll just go grab it."

He pointed his flashlight at the ground to minimize its light. It would be better, tonight, if Anna just fell asleep. Matthew stepped on Anna's dark jeans, which lay beside a lighter pair and a white pair, in between the bed and the wood-paneled wall. She'd removed the clothes from her suitcase messily, probably as she searched for her swimsuit. Matthew tiptoed toward the bathroom, stepping on a white sundress, a patterned blouse, and a shiny navy negligee with black lace trim which Anna had not put on tonight after removing her suit. She was naked now, on the bed, without any blankets—it was too hot without the air conditioning—and her eyes were closed. Her shoulder bag was also strewn open: on the floor was a leather folder embossed with the name of her accounting firm, a paperback with a photo of a red-soled black stiletto pump, a large slim shiny-covered manual called "Managing Relationships First: The Manager's Guide to Prioritizing Personal Growth." In the bathroom, silver and black tubs of makeup spilled out of a pink zippered case. Anna was everywhere, and Matthew's possessions were barely in evidence. Just a rollerboard suitcase on the luggage rack, and, on the writing table, a sketchbook, long-lensed camera, and pencil case.

Matthew hung the towel on a hook behind the door. He bent his head under the faucet and took a small mouthful of water. What he'd said to his wife about the towel had been a lie—a corner of it had been lying atop his stack of T-shirts. His suit was fine. Now he returned to his suitcase in the bedroom, and, while glancing at Anna, opened its small outside pocket. Beneath his dark dress socks he found a vial of pills. He opened it, quiet as he could, and swallowed one.

“Hey.” Anna had opened her eyes. “What are you doing?” She'd rolled onto her side. She must have heard him. “You coming back?” From the tone of her voice he could tell she still wanted to have sex.

“Yeah.”

“Are you okay?”

“Just a headache,” he said, feeling his face warm. “I'll be fine.”

*

The morning ride began at 9 AM. The riders signed waivers over breakfast, strapped on their helmets and chaps, chose their horses, and took a quick lesson from Alejandro. They learned it was okay to kick hard, to pull hard; they learned the difference between walking, trotting, galloping, and cantering.

Anna hated the way it felt to walk. At such a slow pace, most of the horse's motion was vertical. Her body was thrown up and down, and to her dismay she learned how many parts of her body were not subject to her control: her breasts, the weight at her waist, the undersides of her arms, and even what little slackness existed in her face. All around her the vista was light-soaked, peaceful—in the rows of soy, the leaves shone skyward like so many upturned palms; stray dogs and horses darted in the distance; an

occasional tiny owl alighted in the dirt—and she kept getting wrenched out of her reverie by the feeling of her brain bouncing too hard inside her skull.

Alejandro was leading them along a dirt path between two soy fields, behind the bright white *estancia* with its flat red roof. When they turned a corner, the path widened, and at last the horses could trot.

“This feels so much better!” Anna said, ecstatically, to no one in particular. Matthew had fallen several lengths behind her.

“Yes!” Josina said. “I agree.” Josina was the younger of the two Dutch sisters, and had just spent a semester in Santiago, where she’d studied poetry. Anna remembered reading Pablo Neruda in high school—for some reason his name brought to mind artichokes—and she resolved to read more poetry in the New Year.

Josina’s thin blond ponytail fell like shimmering rope from the base of her helmet, and she leaned forward on her horse with her shoulders pulled back.

“You look so natural,” Anna called to her.

Josina explained that she’d ridden growing up, and in college, then offered Anna advice. “The key is not to tense yourself against the horse’s rhythm, not to try to control her. You want to find her rhythm, and follow it.”

Anna tried a few rounds of this, with Josina watching and encouraging her. She got the hang of the motion quickly. When the horse lifted itself she used the strength of her legs in the stirrups to raise her hips. When the horse’s body dropped, she dropped her hips too. This motion took energy and effort, but felt much better. The air was getting warmer, and soon her shirt was soaked in sweat.

*

At the back of the pack of ten riders was a tiny white-haired gaucho, with loose pants, leathery skin, and a handlebar mustache. Matthew rode right in front of him.

Everyone else was ahead. Matthew was the slowest. He did not mind this; it was nice to be alone. The gaucho did not speak English, other than a few words: *pull, right, left, no, faster.*

Matthew had his camera at his hip; it hung from a thick padded strap around his neck. He was taking pictures of scenes he might later paint. Customers loved to buy paintings of places they'd traveled, even if they didn't recognize the scenes. It was yet another way to brag: look where I've been! Not that Matthew didn't do it, too. His paintings of exotic locales proved he had money, and at fairs when he found himself next to particularly strange and embarrassing vendors—tube socks embroidered with cartoons, purses made out of cereal boxes—his display of paintings of Cape Cod, Napa Valley, Nice, and Paris brought him comfort and confidence. He displayed a few of his paintings in his classroom for the same reason.

Sometimes he found pictures of places he hadn't been, and painted those, or something like them. Yes, this was unethical. But he needed inspiration, an infusion, every now and then. This was their first international trip since their honeymoon to Europe. Not that he wanted to go on more trips—he didn't like to travel. He was here for Anna. In fact, being here, riding a horse, getting all nice and scared, it made him feel sick.

In Buenos Aires they'd taken a taxi ride through Boca, to see the soccer stadium and the bright-painted houses by the harbor. The hotel staff had advised them not to get out of the car. But Anna wanted to. "What's the worst that can happen? My purse gets

stolen?” she’d said. (That was another thing. The *money*. They had it, thanks to Anna. But this trip cost more than a year’s worth of Matthew’s paintings.) They fought. Matthew won. He would *not* get out of the car, and so she wouldn’t get out either. Not alone.

Her desire to go horseback riding was that same desire, in another form. It seemed Anna wanted to be in danger. Why? Because they could? Because they did not and now would not have children?

They’d come to this foreign country to play. The let’s-try-not-to-get-pickpocketed game, the horseback riding game, the blind competitive wine tasting game for which they had each paid \$100, trying to best each other by guessing the grape, barrel type, flavors, undertones, and vintage, as if anyone could taste a year on his tongue. They were oversized children. A lost boy and girl in Never Never Land.

But the homes Matthew had seen, and photographed, on the way to Boca. The homes he’d seen on his way to the estancia. They were shacks stacked side by side, with walls that leaned and holes in the roofs. Unsupervised children ran through the streets barefoot. Stray dogs barked and yipped and followed them. Why were Anna and Matthew giving their money to wineries?

Their own house, back in Connecticut, haunted him too. Four bedrooms on three-quarters of an acre, one of them Anna’s home office, one Matthew’s studio. A plush green lawn which he mowed every other week. An open kitchen-dining-living room area on the first floor. A basement, carpeted and large, which he only set foot in to do their laundry, about twice a week.

Last night Matthew had told Karl and Agnes about their reason for coming here—Anna’s miscarriage—and about Anna’s subsequent change of heart.

After he'd explained how it happened, how Anna had noticed the bleeding at a client's office in upstate New York, how she'd gone to the hospital there and received the new alone, Agnes asked him, "And you want children, still?"

Matthew, drunk and blushing now, said yes. He had not said this to his own parents, for fear that they would make comments to Anna, or try to interfere. He had not said it to himself, not even silently.

"But do you think you could be happy without them?" Karl said. "With your painting, your students, traveling?"

Matthew lied. "Maybe," he said. "But something has to change."

"Maybe you," Agnes said.

"The only thing you can change!" Karl laughed.

*

The morning ride was two hours. At its end, Anna felt happy but depleted; as she dismounted, a sudden headache pounded dully at her temples. As the cook set out lunch, she went to go change her shirt. She decided she would also find some ibuprofen. Matthew was the one who had packed their toiletries and medicine. She remembered last night, how he'd gone in the small pocket of his suitcase. It was strange. On past vacations, he'd kept his dirty socks and underwear there. At least that was what it had looked like; it had been dark.

When she found the solitary pill bottle beneath his dress socks, she shook a pill into her hand. It was tiny, blue. She wondered if he was he on drugs, or an antidepressant. She knew nothing about drugs. The label read *Sildenafil. Pill count: 30*. About ten pills remained in the orange plastic bottle.

He had to be lying to her. He'd purchased and packed trial-sized medicines of all kinds: pain reliever, antihistamine, antibiotic cream, decongestant. Why wasn't this bottle with those? She sat on the bed and breathed deeply. She knew that in just a few minutes Matthew would come for her.

As she waited there a sudden brightness startled her. The electricity had turned back on, illuminating the circle of fluorescent light above her head.

*

Matthew had finished a beer at the picnic table. Anna hadn't returned.

His was the kind of mind that found the worst explanation first. This predilection—like paranoia, only he applied it to situations that did not involve him—in general only served to increase the nervous tension that strung his shoulders into a slight hunch and made him so ready to blush.

Because of this propensity, on occasion he also exaggerated his own problems and attacked them preemptively. In this instance, his attack had backfired.

After Anna's miscarriage, she was told she could not have sex for six weeks. Matthew kept track of the time but never mentioned how much remained. He didn't want to pressure her. Right at the end of the interval, they were kissing in bed on a Friday night and Anna was murmuring "Mm," and pressing her lips against his. He rolled so that he was partially on top of her. She allowed him to do this. Then, for that one second, he was thrilled, but in the next breath he wanted to cry. He was thinking of the child they'd lost. His arousal dissipated. A few nights later, he performed the same experiment, with the same result. He went to the doctor, to whom he hyperbolized his

issue in order to obtain a prescription. The prescription he thought of as a life jacket, which even a talented swimmer wears on a boat. Just in case.

He sat on the bed beside her and told her all of this. How his only goal had been not to upset her. The room was bright with artificial light, their one large window shuttered. She had stood up and closed it, since their room looked out onto the backyard, with the grill and picnic table, where the other riders were finishing lunch. The air conditioning hummed through the vents, pushing cool air down from above.

“I don’t know what else I could have done,” he said, honestly. He did not regret his decision to keep the pills secret. This moment would have been more awful had it taken place sooner, and in their house.

“Tell me the truth?” Anna was now sitting on the bed, and Matthew was standing. “There are lots of things we could have done.”

He rolled his head backward in a gesture of hopelessness, which he realized too late probably read as exasperation.

“You’re frustrated.” Some sort of understanding dawned in her face. “You’re not attracted to me anymore.”

“Anna. You’re beautiful!”

“Attraction is not objective. You can’t control it.”

He sat down beside her on the bed, just far enough away so that their legs didn’t touch. “This isn’t about attraction.”

She made a skeptical face.

“It’s that my life has been shattered. I...”

“Oh, really?” She swept her arm across the room, indicating their things, the large room and its rustic charm, the *estancia*, the country of Argentina.

He’d never told he didn’t want to come. He’d never even hinted. She had no idea that he was doing all of this for her. This was a secret he should probably continue to keep. “You agreed before, about adoption.”

“What?” She’d been looking at the wall, and now she looked at him. “What does adoption have to do with having sex?”

“I want to know why. Why you changed your mind.”

“We’ve talked about this.”

“But why? I mean, really?”

She squinted and exhaled. “A lot has happened,” she said. “I guess I’ve changed.”

“I still don’t...”

“But you agreed, Matthew. We both said it wasn’t meant to be.” Her voice sounded tired, as if she thought the conversation was over.

“*Meant to be?* I’ve never used that phrase.” He was sure of this. “Are you talking about God? Like God decided to take away our baby because he wanted us to travel the world?”

Anna’s eyes lit up, then she made her mental math face, the one she made during board games and while comparing prices in the grocery store. “Okay, yes, God. I am talking about God. I felt like God. That was the problem. It was all up to me, I could buy whatever I wanted, and with every disappointment there was always another more expensive option. I don’t want to be God. I don’t want to be that responsible.”

Matthew thought of their empty house. He let loose a guttural grunt, the gateway to tears.

“Did you seriously come to Argentina to convince me to adopt?”

“No. No, I didn’t. Anna, I’m sorry.”

She stared at him and his eyes welled, until he had to wipe a tear.

“Hey,” she said, “I love you. Let’s make the best of this.”

They held each other in a long embrace, and Matthew stroked Anna’s sweaty hair.

“Hey,” he took her hand abruptly and guided it toward himself. “See?”

Anna drew her hand back and rolled her eyes. “Where’s the Motrin?”

*

During the afternoon ride, the air was thick with heat and wetness and dust. Anna’s headache subsided, but now her eyes itched and her nose was running. All around the riders were endless rows of bright green soy, and ahead of them stretched the straight, dry-dirt path.

Matthew was riding beside her. “Are you okay?” he asked, as she sniffled and wiped thin clear snot with the back of her hand. He asked in such a way as to imply that she wasn’t, that he thought she was crying. But she was having a good time.

“I’m just allergic,” she said, “to some kind of pollen here.”

“Then you probably don’t want to rub your eyes like that.”

But to rub her eyes felt good, incredible. She kept at it. She’d forgiven Matthew before because she wanted to have a good time, a good vacation, but the part of her still mad at him—no, not mad even; it was the part of her that found him, frankly, ridiculous—enjoyed flouting his advice. Then, as she rubbed, one of her contacts

popped out into the dirt. “Oh!” she said, and when Matthew said, “What?” she didn’t tell him what had happened. Her horse kept trotting; the contact was forever lost.

She had a strong prescription, and couldn’t afford to lose the other one. Willing herself not to rub her eyes again, which both still itched so temptingly, she took her hands off the reins and clasped them. Riding without her hands on the reins was both thrilling and relaxing. She let them rest in her lap. The air was getting warmer.

It didn’t take long for Matthew to notice. “Anna!” he shouted.

“Shh...” she whispered. At the sound of his voice she swore she felt her horse twitch, shaking its mane just slightly in irritation. “You might spook them.”

Soon the group paused in a clearing for water.

“Now,” Alejandro said. “Who would like to canter?”

The path ahead was wide, and ran parallel to a paved road. Along the path’s left border ran a chain link fence, its twisted metal tessellations mostly hidden by leaves—all manner of bush, tree, and bramble grew on and behind it.

Anna raised her hand. “I do!”

From the angle at which Matthew stared at her, he saw the diamonds in her engagement and wedding ring sparkle. “I do too,” he said, though he did not. But he was going to make an effort. He was going to learn to want what Anna wanted, because he had to.

They were the first ones to volunteer. Alejandro said something in Spanish to the tiny old gaucho, who galloped ahead down the path. “This is how it works.” Alejandro

lifted a small whip, indicating that he, not the riders, would give the orders to each horse. “Hold on to your reins. Juan up there will tell you when to stop.”

At the noise of the whip, suddenly Matthew was flying. His body tilted left, then right, as his horse’s legs devoured the path beneath him. Dusty air scraped his eyes. His body kept tilting, his butt sliding side to side across the saddle. He realized, with horror, that his horse was trying to throw him off. He gripped the reins harder and pressed his elbows into the animal’s neck, as if to say *no, you’re not the only one in control!*

“Ha!” Anna yelled, exultantly, from several lengths behind him. Her voice was thin and distant over the pounding hooves.

“Are you okay?” Matthew screamed, too scared to turn around and look.

She didn’t answer.

“Anna!” He yelled louder. “Are you okay?”

Finally she answered, “I’m fine!”

But they weren’t, he saw now, all too clearly. They were in danger. A thick branch extended from the fence across their path, high enough that a horse could duck under it, but not a rider... no, Matthew thought. He had to stop. He pulled on his reins. The horse didn’t slow. The horse didn’t even react. There was nothing else to do.

Matthew yelled, “Anna, roll off! Watch!”

Feeling oddly powerful, he slid off the horse—to his left, toward the fence. As he landed rocks punched and scratched him, but these pains did not compare to the full-body slap of the earth. A cloud of dry dirt filled his mouth. He clasped his hands to his chest and prayed. Please God, he thought, let Anna be safe.

Anna, from several lengths behind, watched this happen.

The branch was approaching her now, blurring when she blinked and multiplying when she tried to focus. With her contact missing, she couldn't trust her vision. And yet she wasn't scared. Her breath was even and her heart wasn't pounding. She was gliding on her horse and her horse wasn't scared, either. She could tell.

Anna ducked her head just slightly and closed her eyes. At that moment Matthew rolled a quarter turn toward the path. A rock was digging into his back, and he wanted to see Anna.

Anna heard her husband's scream, and, safely under the branch (which was really not so low—everyone else would make it under just fine in a few minutes, even tall Karl)—she pulled on her horse's reins and opened her eyes.

First Thoughts

Elise felt deceived. Hiking in Acadia, with her mother's new family, did not involve merely putting one foot in front of the other, sometimes uphill. It could have. But Officer Ted, with the help of his over-stimulated children, did not choose the easy paths. Instead, with them, hiking was a four-limbed effort in which body-sized rocks were scaled and then, far more awkwardly—often, for Elise, using her ass—somehow descended.

Elise had been looking forward to escaping New York for a weekend, with all expenses paid by Officer Ted, her mother's new 40-year-old husband. Her mother, Janet, was 50. Elise wanted sun on her face. She wanted to smell the sea. She wanted to walk through damp green woods bursting with wildflowers while thinking about *what's next*—in the play she was writing and in her life—rather than, as she did everyday in her classroom, mere survival. She wanted a tan.

They were now on their third hike of the day; they'd scaled two peaks before lunch. This hill, the steepest yet, was what Ted called a rock field. It looked like God had pressed pause on an avalanche. Signs along the trail read, "Beware of falling rock." Even the trail markers were made of stone, little piles of five or six oval-shaped rocks, the largest on the bottom and the smallest on top, stacked like a children's toy.

Elise's calves were shaking, and her breath scraped in her ears. She was the last in the line of five hikers. Several yards ahead were Ted, her mother, and Colie, Ted's 13-year-old daughter. P.J., Ted's nine-year-old son, was hiking in front of Elise. Probably because he was young, he sometimes got winded. Elise was winded all the time. She hadn't been to the gym in six months, while paying seventy a month for a membership.

"In your nose and out your mouth!" Elise had encouraged P.J., the first time he sat down on a medium-sized rock and heaved. Tiny pinpricks of sweat sparkled on his forehead. He made a weird face at her, and said nothing.

Not long after, Elise watched P.J. kick over one of the trail markers. With the inside of his foot, as he'd probably been taught to pass a soccer ball. One kick, to the left, for the two rocks on top. Another with his other foot, to the right, for the next two rocks. Then a shove forward for the base. A maximal scattering. Not even the foundation could remain.

Elise stopped to reassemble the trail marker. She took her time, and found herself hoping her family would forget about her. She was enjoying the stretch of squatting, the way her breath slowed and softened as she kept still. The rocks were not easy to balance.

Before she stood she heard her mother. "Elise!" her mother screamed. "Elise!"

"I'm here, Mom," Elise said, standing up and waving.

There was her mother, standing on a boulder and facing down the mountain. From this distance, about 20 yards, Elise saw in her mother what Ted must. Her chin-length auburn hair gleamed in the sun, as did her jewelry, a thick gold herringbone necklace and hoop earrings. Her hands on her hips called attention her slender waist. Her nails were painted and she wore a tight black-and-magenta tracksuit, with matching

tennis shoes. She looked happy, alive, young even, here in the middle of the rock field. Her cheeks and nose were pink, but, unlike Elise, she wasn't sweating.

It was mid-September and they were in Maine; the thin cool air, despite the nearby ocean, smelled overwhelmingly of Christmas. A cruel irony. Elise had never loved Christmas as much as other people—the ones with siblings and dads—but now she hated the holiday. Last year she had to buy presents for Colie and P.J. She bought them a few of her old favorite books, like *A Wrinkle in Time* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which she knew they wouldn't read. Worse, she'd had to act excited each time they opened yet another iPhone accessory. Unfortunately, she hadn't been able to sustain her feigned excitement for long, and ten minutes after she opened her last gift (Colie and P.J. had tons more) she went into Ted's TV room to read. This, like much of Elise's behavior over the course of her life, had not gone over well with her mother. They fought, once they were finally alone—in the car on the way to the bus station, her mother wondering loudly and repeatedly why Elise could not, at her age, just *suck it up* and be a good sport, Elise insisting that everything she knew she had learned from her mom—and since late December they had not been calling each other. They emailed instead. The invitation to this weekend had arrived electronically; Elise had accepted, feeling both selfish and magnanimous. This combination was the key to happiness, Elise thought, though admittedly she wasn't there yet. To do what you want, to *get* something, while earning the respect and fulfillment that come with serving others. And yet, just like her job as a long-term substitute teaching Health, this weekend had been better in theory than it now was in practice.

Should she tell on P.J.? Elise wondered, as she stood and started climbing toward her mother. Wasn't something wrong with him, if he felt this urge to destroy a trail marker, to confuse a stream of strangers he'd never met? Elise would never have done that as a child. And yet, she had been yelled at—just like this past Christmas—constantly, for so many things. For slouching, rolling her eyes, taking long showers. She knew her mother never yelled like that at Colie or P.J. Ted wouldn't love her if she did.

“Are you okay?” her mother asked, once Elise caught up with her. “Tired?” She touched Elise's shoulder. Involuntarily, Elise flinched.

“No,” she said, knowing she sounded defensive. “I was picking up a trail marker someone knocked over.”

They continued across the rocks in silence, hearing the wind against the trees and the distant crashing of the ocean a thousand feet beneath them. “That's nice of you,” her mother said finally. “I do wish you'd called out to us, though. I was worried about you. I couldn't see you, you know, and it took you a while.”

“Sorry,” Elise said.

“Well, let's catch up now. We can do it.” As her mother sped up, Elise realized that this was the first time they'd been alone together since she'd arrived.

*

The next morning, Elise's mother woke her at nine.

“I let you sleep late,” her mother said cheerfully. “We're leaving in 15 minutes for Precipice. I made pancakes.”

The bedroom was bright and unfamiliar. The curtains were Irish lace and Elise had forgotten to draw down the shades last night. Through the window was a view of

the cottage's garden, with wildflowers and rosebushes and a white trellis that arched over a granite bench. Behind the garden rose the distant peak of a mountain, which from here was just a gentle sloping shadow against the sky.

Elise tried to move, and the muscles in her lower body tingled with pain. She could smell the pancakes, the sweet, buttery, bread-like scent, plus banana and a touch of burnt chocolate.

“I can't hike today,” she slurred. “I can't.” She was sore, and it was Sunday.

Every Sunday, whether in her Murray Hill apartment with the folders of ungraded papers piled on her bureau—she didn't have room for a desk—or here in Bar Harbor, Maine, with a few of those same folders crammed into a canvas bag, the revelation that Monday was coming was no less awful. It would be different if she weren't a long-term substitute, if she weren't teaching Health. She hadn't been able to find a job as an English teacher in a Title I school—she had to work in a Title I school for five years; if she did, her loans would be paid off. But she was highly unqualified to be teaching this subject. She was overweight, for one. She could not name components of male or female anatomy without blushing, a deep uncontrollable red that could linger for a whole class period. Recently, in desperation, she'd bought value packs of Starbursts and Hershey Kisses to distribute, to keep her students' mouths shut, if only briefly. One of her students pointed out the irony. “You're giving out *candy* in *health class*? Sick.” So now the bags were hidden in a cabinet, and Elise would eat them all herself, eventually. Though she knew this, she could not bring herself to throw them away. The waste! She didn't make enough money to squander fourteen dollars.

Tomorrow she would be back at school. She would teach until 3:30, clean her room and lesson plan until 5, then take the subway to her playwriting class on the Upper West Side, which started at 6. “I need to do work.”

“What kind of work?” her mother asked. “I thought you said you didn’t have much, that you’d do it on the plane tonight.”

“I forgot about some grading. Also lesson planning.” She didn’t mention her play, the thing she really wanted to work on.

“Do you have a textbook?”

“Yes,” Elise mumbled, her lips heavy, “Of course I do.”

“It’s just, I know some schools are really online these days. Colie watches video of her teachers giving lectures online instead of doing regular homework. Isn’t that cool?”

“Can I go back to sleep please?”

She closed her eyes as her mother shut the door. A sweet sound.

Elise fell back asleep wondering where she’d spend the afternoon. Where she would read, write, and maybe even lesson plan. The house Ted rented had a screened porch and a deck, the garden with its bench and trellis, a living room with a sectional couch and huge storm window... She also thought about the downtown streets of Bar Harbor. There had to be a cute café with great coffee and ample space, maybe with a view of the water... she stayed awake long enough to hear voices escalate—the hubbub before the departure—then, after a slammed door, disappear. She was alone.

When she emerged two hours later, hungry, with a dull headache, her mother was sitting at the kitchen table solving a Sudoku puzzle in the Bangor Times.

“You didn’t go hiking?” Elise asked. Her mother wore a boat-necked tunic dress in pink and white stripes and foamy platform flip-flops. Thick black straps, made of bathing-suit material, peeked out of her dress’s collar.

“I didn’t want you to be alone. How are you feeling?”

“Fine. Hungry.”

Her mom pointed to the stovetop, where a blanket of aluminum foil covered a plate. “You can heat those up in the microwave or I can turn on the oven. Although I would like to get moving soon, if that’s okay.”

Elise walked, stiffly, toward the fridge. She took out an apple and a yogurt. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, I packed you an apple and a yogurt already, in the cooler.” Elise hadn’t noticed the cooler—a large one, rectangular, big as a hope chest, made of red plastic with a white top. It sat by the front door next to a full backpack and a straw tote stuffed with towels. “Did you know the park has a beach? I thought we could go there for the day, and you can get work done. Doesn’t that sound nice?”

“Sure.” She put her apple and yogurt back. “What are you reading these days, Mom?”

“They have a bookshelf here, lots of different things. I have my Kindle too.”

“What are you reading on it?”

“Oh, something historical. Like an Ann Boleyn thing. What about you?”

“Does *Us Weekly* count?”

Elise expected her mother to laugh, or widen her eyes in concern. Elise had been an English major. Ever since she’d learned to read, books had accompanied her

everywhere, kept her company and saved her from boredom; they were her surrogate siblings.

Instead her mother said, “Ooh, I *love* Us Weekly! When I’m in the line at the supermarket, the cashier has to tear me away. I love to see which celebrities wear the same dresses. What’s your favorite part?”

“The pictures,” Elise said, drily, and her mother responded, “So great! Now get dressed. It may not be warm enough for a bathing suit, but I put one on anyway. Why not.”

*

From the parking lot at the beach, a dirt trail made of long steps led down to the shore. Each step was a meter long, the earth somehow shaped and flattened into these discrete pieces, then held in place by weathered two-by-fours. Stepping out of the car, Elise smelled salt and fish, but she could not see the beach. It would be a long trip down—the steps looked endless from here. Her mother had packed so much stuff: a cooler, beach chairs, an umbrella, backgammon, Scrabble, towels, snacks, books, a little table.

With chairs and bags hanging off their shoulders, Elise and her mother carried the cooler together. Elise had to ask for two breaks, during which she sat down on the cooler and rested her head in her hands. The cooler was so heavy because Ted and his kids were going to meet them here in the late afternoon, after their hikes.

The grains of sand were thick, like pebbles, and felt cold and rough against Elise’s feet. Elise chose a spot between two older couples, though within minutes of sitting down she realized one of them had grandchildren. Blond, purple-lipped, shivering boys,

they'd been down at the water in wetsuits; they looked like they'd been rolling in the sand. Now they were screaming, laughing, playing paddleball. Elise took her iPod from her canvas bag. The battery was dead.

The wind whipped Elise's hair in her face. She raised her sweatshirt's hood in an attempt to trap the loose wisps. She took out her script, which she kept in a white three-ring binder that was stained with splotches of ink and discolored by dust. She often read her own work on the subway or at school during her free period.

Her mother was looking at the blond boys and smiling. She had not taken out a book or her Kindle. "They are so cute, aren't they. Look, they have paddle-ball. Remember, you used to play that with your father?" She said *your father* now, instead of *Dad*, when speaking to Elise. Elise had heard her say to Ted's kids: *go ask your dad!* and even *what did Dad say?* Ted's kids called her Jan, not Janet. No one else, except Ted, called her Jan. It was an entirely different name, simpler and soft, with no sharpness to it. It was the name of a daughter on the *Brady Bunch*.

Elise did not need to wonder whether her mother's sharpness, her strictness, remained despite her shortened name. It didn't. She was not P.J. and Colie's real parent. She could spoil them, caress them, laugh when they insulted each other or their father, even herself, and let Ted be the one who reprimanded. If Jan were to become obsessed with something—as Janet had with Elise's posture, telling her to sit up straighter ten times an hour, running a fingernail up over the bumps of her spine while walking by as Elise did her homework—or if she were to lose her temper, to swear, or to, out of exhaustion, just not quite care enough, there would be another adult there to point this

out to her. And she would listen. She loved Ted. Or at least she was in love with all that he had given her.

“Don’t you remember? You *loved* that. Remember?” Her mother was so agreeable now. So agreeable that she craved—demanded—to be agreed with, always. “I bought one for P.J. for his birthday but I don’t think he’s touched it. But what can you do? Kids these days, with their Wiis and their fancy phones.”

“Mm.”

“I love the Wii. Have you played it? We had a tennis tournament last night, after you went to bed.”

“Mm.”

“Have you played it?”

“Mm hm.” Elise clicked her pen.

“Where?”

“College. Okay, I’m going to get some work done now.”

“Oap! Go ahead. For-*give* me.” And there it was, just a touch, in her voice—the old sharpness. It was only for Elise now, Elise realized, and maybe it always had been.

*

Ted, Colie, and P.J. showed up less than an hour later, at 1 PM. Elise had just finished rereading her script, which was close to finished.

Her play was a sort of reversed, comical, modern-day Cinderella story. The protagonist, like Elise, has been raised by a single mother who is about to remarry. The story takes place in Newport, Rhode Island, over the course of the mother’s wedding weekend. Like Ted, the mother’s fiancé has two children, though in the play the

daughters are identical, beautiful blond twins, the same age as the protagonist, who is a junior in high school. In the play's climax, the main character, serving as maid of honor in the ceremony, yells at her mother, "You don't love *him*, you love *them*!" And the husband, an affable guy played by a Jason Bateman-type, realizes the truth of this statement and calls the wedding off. By then the protagonist has fallen in love with Jason Bateman's wealthy, handsome nephew.

Happy endings aside, the truth was, Elise did suspect her mother of ulterior motives in her marriage to Ted. Elise knew she gave her mother little to brag about, whereas Colie and Jonah were smart, athletic; their mother, who'd died of breast cancer two years after Jonah was born, had played soccer for Princeton. Colie and Jonah often wore Princeton gear—in fact, today, as Jonah walked across the beach kicking sand at his sister, he was wearing orange shorts with the black-and-white logo in the corner by his knee.

Colie, sauntering across the sand in front of him, wore a lime-green bikini top with loose black sweatpants. She had big breasts and she was so thin she nearly had a six-pack; she was an accomplished rhythmic gymnast.

"I thought you guys were going on a hike after lunch." Elise said to Ted, as he stood over her chair, holding up his hand for a high-five. He was balding, at 40, and shaved what hair he had, a mix of dark blonde and gray, close to his scalp. Wrinkles fanned around his eyes and multiplied his dimples.

"Precipice was more than enough," Ted said.

"Really?" asked Elise's mother. She sounded disappointed to have missed it.

“It was awesome,” Colie said. “It had a lot of ladders, so that made it easier. We could have done another trail.”

“But the kids wanted more quality time with Elise. Right, guys?”

After a pause, Ted grinned. He was joking. Elise felt a surge of respect for Ted—she appreciated his ability to tell, or rather, joke about, the truth. He seemed to understand, unlike Elise’s mother, that no amount of bonding on the beach or trudging through punishing hikes could ever make their families truly merge. He knew his children would never be giddy at the prospect of seeing their grown-up health teacher step-sister.

Colie sat in the sand, legs sprawled, back curved. She was playing with her phone. She looked up. “Yeah, though! I do hate being the only girl. You don’t want to *know* what they were doing.”

Elise laughed, along with everyone.

As if on cue, P.J. screamed, “I win!” He’d already introduced himself to the blond boys, and taken over one of their paddles.

Elise put away her script and took out a folder of quizzes, on the food pyramid, to start grading.

*

She graded ten quizzes before coming across one that said, Ms. OINK-wen, with an impressive, insulting caricature of Elise as a pig, standing in front of a blackboard—the pig was even wearing one of Elise’s favorite outfits. A knee-length sweater dress with a scarf, belt, and booties. She groaned and opened her script.

“What are you working on now?” her mother asked. Ted and P.J. were playing catch up to their ankles in the freezing water; Colie was dozing on a towel.

Elise laid her forearms across the binder’s pages. “Something for class.”

“Private, huh? What kind of class?” Her mother leaned toward her and stared without shame at her notes. “*First thought, worst thought*. What’s that?”

“It’s a playwriting class.” She closed her binder.

“You’re writing a play? Honey, that’s incredible.”

“Well, it may not turn out incredible. We’ll see.”

“I like that saying. A lot. *First thought, worst thought*.”

“Yeah. It’s harder than it sounds, though.” Elise’s instructor, Tony, was in his seventies and partially deaf; he often barked non-sequiturs at his class. This saying was his favorite: *First thought, worst thought! Push yourselves harder, guys!* At first Elise had written this down and boxed it in highlighter; over the last few weeks, however, she’d grown to hate it. It paralyzed rather than inspired her.

“Let’s try it together. What’s happening in your screenplay next? I’ll give you the first really bad idea and you can come up with a better one.”

“That’s okay,” Elise said.

“What kind of play is it for? A romantic comedy?” Elise and her mother had watched a lot of these when Elise was in late elementary and middle school.

“Kind of. And a drama, I guess.”

“What about?” her mother asked.

“It’s hard to say. Like, a family.”

“A big family?”

“No, not really.”

“Oh. Like *our* family?”

“Not exactly.”

“Could I read it?”

“Not now. It’s got a long way to go.”

“I’ll let you get to it then.”

Elise looked up. Her mom’s bright auburn hair was blowing in all kinds of directions, and she wore less makeup than usual—or else it had rubbed off—so the redness in her skin showed through, especially around her nose. She’d put on one of Officer Ted’s sweatshirts, over her tunic dress. She looked frumpy, suddenly, like someone else’s mom.

“Thanks,” Elise said, and smiled, her own hair blowing in her face as she looked up.

*

Elise had a flight at 9 PM, and it would take three hours to drive to Portland. They packed up their chairs and towels at 3:30. Ted wanted to bring P.J. to see the lobster boats. Elise’s mother drove Elise and Colie home.

Back at the house, as Elise and her mother carried the cooler to the fridge, the sound of the shower turned on; it was Colie. The last shower she’d taken had been over twenty minutes. After Elise and her mother hung the wet towels on drying racks in the basement, emptied the contents of the cooler back into the fridge—Elise took the cooler out to the backyard and emptied the inches of ice and water, an awkward task, and she

spilled some ice water on her feet—Colie was still in the shower. The house had only one.

“Will you tell her to get out?” Elise said. “I really need to get in. I need to leave.”

“Why don’t you start packing?” her mother suggested. Elise remembered that her showers, growing up, had been strictly limited to twelve minutes. She was tempted to mention this.

“Fine,” she said instead, agreeably, and went into her room, where clothes and books lay scattered on her unmade twin bed. She’d brought clothes in a rollerboard carry-on and books and school papers in her canvas bag. But she’d forgotten to bring her canvas bag into her room. She must have left it in the living room or kitchen. She needed it to pack.

It wasn’t in either room. Her mother had disappeared by now, into her own room, which was on the first floor of the house. Elise went out to the car.

She searched under the front seat and back seats. In the trunk. Inside her mother’s large straw bag, which hung on a peg in the garage, and held their dry, unused towels. Elise’s canvas bag was nowhere. Had she left it at the beach? No: she remembered placing it in the trunk, next to the cooler and the stack of nested beach chairs.

Elise opened her mother’s door without knocking. Her mother was changing out of her bathing suit, into a pair of linen pants. She was bent over beside her bed, her breasts exposed and hanging loosely. Elise hadn’t seen her mother naked in years—not since they’d gone bathing suit shopping at Filene’s Basement, which had communal

dressing rooms. Filene's Basement was out of business now, and her mother shopped at Macy's and Nordstrom.

"What do you need, honey?" Her mother's voice was calm, unembarrassed. She did not shield herself as she turned to open a drawer.

"My bag."

"What about it?"

"It's gone."

"Which bag?" Her mother raised her arms, pulling on a white tank top with a built-in bra.

"The one I had at the beach. I can't find it anywhere."

"Let me look. You need to shower." Elise hadn't noticed that the water had turned off.

"No. I'll look with you." The thought of her mother holding her bag—which held her binder, her play—made Elise feel hot and ill. Once in high school her mother had read her journal, and Elise had gotten in trouble for writing about attending a party. Elise no longer kept a journal. Just remembering this episode, the blow-out fight, made her reel with a sense of betrayal and injustice.

Their rigorous search revealed nothing. At 4:30 PM Elise's mother said, "You need to shower. Why don't I drive back to the beach, just to see."

"I *remember* seeing it in the car."

"Maybe you're remembering wrong."

"I'm not!"

"I just don't know what else to do, Elise. Will you let me, please?"

“Fine,” Elise said. “I mean, thank you.”

In the shower she fumed, scrubbed hard at her scalp, nicked her knee, deeply, with her razor. Her mother was going to come back with her bag, after reading her play. Elise’s towel was white, plush; it belonged to the owners of the house. Though she could have gotten a paper towel or a tissue, she rubbed at the bloody cut with the white towel, oddly satisfied to be ruining something.

Back in her room, she watched herself in the mirror as she combed her tangled hair. It was flat and dark. Her skin was pale and bloated. Distracted by a surge of self-loathing—does *Miss Oink-wen* have any respect to lose, even if she were to have lost a full set of tests?—she almost stopped caring about her bag, and felt surprised when her mother knocked. “It wasn’t there,” her mother said, entering and sitting down on the bed. Her mother wore her linen pants and a sweatshirt, her hair still damp, no makeup. She projected an air of eerie calm, of resignation. “Tell me what was in it?”

“It had my play, my sunglasses. It also had a folder full of my students’ tests.”

“*What?* Your students’ papers?” Her mother scratched at her bright wet hair.

“Why are you suddenly so much more shocked?” Something had popped and burst inside Elise, like a water balloon. It was a suspicion, it was messy, it was spilling, and she could not contain it.

“I’m not. It’s just, that’s really serious.” She stood up. “We’ll search the house again.”

“But I just don’t understand. I would never have left it at the beach—I distinctly remember putting it in the trunk—and it was only you and me that unpacked the car. Colie didn’t help at all, did she? You didn’t even ask her to help. You just let her get in

the shower right away, and stay there forever, even though I'm the one who needs to catch a flight."

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand what you're saying."

"I'm saying Colie didn't unpack the car, at all, so if I wasn't the one who moved my bag, then you did. Right?"

"But I didn't."

"Maybe you don't remember. Isn't that possible? Maybe if you thought harder you would."

"If I brought it inside, we would have found it by now."

"Maybe you hid it somewhere."

"By accident?"

"*Maybe* by accident. Maybe not."

"Why would I want to hide your bag?"

"So you can read my play."

Her mother's eyes narrowed; splotches of pink appeared on her cheeks and forehead. When she spoke, she spoke slowly. "Why would I," she crossed her arms and stepped toward the door, "want to read, your *play*?"

"Don't be a bitch," Elise said. She had never sworn at her mother before; her mother was too strict. Her mother had sworn at her, though—this, in fact, was a direct quote, from a fight in high school during which Elise said she was only looking at colleges located at least a state away from her mother. Recycled, years later, like a fragment of glass turned into art by the sea, the words now felt smooth, polished, and pretty in Elise's mouth.

What Elise's mother had just said was hurtful, and offensive. But it wasn't true, Elise knew. In fact, it only proved that she had exactly the capacity to do what Elise thought she'd done.

"You can look for your bag by yourself now," her mother said. "Let us know when you're ready to leave."

*

Officer Ted drove them to the airport. Elise's mother sat in the front seat. The sky was still bright, the highways clear and fast. No one spoke much—Elise's mother asked Ted to get in the left lane. Ted asked her mother to turn up the radio.

The bag was still missing, but Elise had left her wallet at home before leaving for the beach, and her phone had been in the pocket of her hooded sweatshirt. She'd be able to function tomorrow, though she'd have to tell her students she'd lost their tests. She'd thought the recent weeks had been tough, taxing, almost as bad as bad gets, but clearly she'd been wrong.

She'd also been wrong to think she could make things up with her mother. She kept feeling pangs of this strange suspicion, of mystification alternating with absolute certainty—her mother could not *still* have her binder and bag, could she? Wouldn't she have given the bag back? And yet... where else could it be?

Ted's phone rang when they were pulling into the airport. Elise's mother answered it.

"Hi, Colie. Everything okay?"

After a pause Elise's mother inhaled sharply. "You did? What were you doing? Oh, your routine. Oh, thank God."

“She found my bag?” Elise asked, craning forward from the backseat.

When her mother hung up she explained that Colie had found it by the garden while practicing her ribbon routine in the backyard. “I have *no* idea how it could have gotten out there,” her mother said.

“Pretty strange,” Ted agreed.

“*Really* strange,” Elise said. “Does Colie practice outside a lot?”

“No,” her mother said.

“Not at home,” Ted added. “She has her own little studio in the basement, remember?”

“Normally she wouldn’t practice on vacation, but at her meet next week she could qualify for the Junior Olympics,” her mother said.

Elise imagined Colie leaping around in the grass and tossing her ribbon toward the clouds. Someone ought to record this. The footage could be an advertisement to promote the sport of rhythmic gymnastics. What a perfect background: the mountains in the distance, the wildflower garden, the rose-covered trellis, the granite bench.

And it was then that Elise remembered. She’d emptied the cooler of ice by the bench in the garden. She might have dropped her own bag there, either before or after she’d poured the icy water—because she was rushing—on her own bare feet.

Remembering that cold shock on her toes reminded her that Colie, at the very same time Elise had emptied the cooler, had been in the shower. In a flash of anger and envy, Elise couldn’t help but blame her stepsister. The beautiful slender thirteen-year-old who took 20-minute showers and was probably about to qualify for the Junior Olympics. The girl who didn’t even think to ask, *can I shower first?*

“Elise?” her mother said. “When do you need these papers by? If it is really urgent we can overnight them.”

Elise felt her face warm. Her mother was being kind, helpful. At once Elise was embarrassed and disgusted by her thoughts. Colie was not lucky, she remembered. Colie was motherless. *Why* would she ask to shower first? *Who* would she ask? Who would have trained her to do this? Elise wondered if something was wrong with her brain. She thought of Tony—*first thought, worst thought*—and wondered if his saying meant more than she’d realized. Her instincts were not just irrational and unwieldy. Worse, they were selfish, small. Her play was probably all of these things too.

Elise’s mistake was not Colie’s fault. Not even close—in fact, Colie had rescued her. Colie had found her bag. Her students’ tests, the script and her notes from class, they’d be on their way to New York as of tomorrow.

This was what her mother and Ted were discussing. Their plans for tomorrow, who would take the bag to FedEx and when. They were staying in Bar Harbor for a few more days before driving back to Massachusetts.

Elise couldn’t help but imagine the white binder lying on the kitchen table in the cabin tonight, and sitting in the passenger seat of her mother’s car tomorrow morning. Could her mother resist reading it? The thought filled her with fear for her mother’s sake—if her mother read her script, she’d been deeply hurt—and horror for her own. Hadn’t Elise known this could happen from the very beginning, from the moment, while packing, that she’d decided to bring her binder? Was this was what she’d been wanting all along?

As she hugged her mother goodbye at the airport curb, she resisted the urge to ask her mother not to read it. Such a request might backfire, and anyway, what did it matter? It was out of her hands now. She couldn't wait for the binder to arrive in New York, at which point she would throw the whole thing away.

Biographical Statement

Elizabeth Thompson was raised in Framingham, Massachusetts. She received her Bachelor of Arts and Science from Stanford University, where she studied English and mathematics. Before pursuing her MFA, she worked as a middle and high school math teacher in Washington, DC., where she lives with her husband.