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The purpose of this thesis was to write the majority of a novel. Each chapter is divided into self-contained stories, all of which were told by different characters. I used either first or third person throughout, depending on the subject matter at hand.

The opening story, told by the mother, introduces several characters including her son, Roland, and a girl named Finley, while also establishing the mother's insecurities about her marriage. Chapter two, or "The Girl's Story," follows Finley's attempt to connect with her biological mother, who has instead started a family without her. "Barbara's Story," which comes next chronologically and in the collection, reveals that Finley has decided to move away from her legal guardian and to try and start a life on her own.

After failing to make enough money, Finley agrees to "fall in love" with Roland in "The Father's Story," a request which directly relates to past events in the father's life. Roland and Finley then meet in "The Chinese Restaurant," and after a catastrophic evening, decide to drive away to New Jersey.

FIVE CHAPTERS OF A LARGER NOVEL

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

CHAPTER

CHAPTER I

THE MOTHER'S STORY

We were supposed to make it work. That's what he told me anyway. "Let's see what we can do," he'd said with confidence and grit. So there I was, going sixty miles per hour on River Road, already three minutes late. I hadn't meant to be. In fact, I'd planned on meeting him in the parking lot of his law firm for at least a week, where he worked as an accountant. "See you at four," he'd said. The place was ten miles south of Point Pleasant, Pennsylvania, and Point Pleasant was still two miles up the street. If I didn't speed up, I knew he wouldn't wait. So really, I had no choice but to go fast. It was a narrow road, but I'd driven it almost every day. To my right was a cliff with a sign that said, "Beware of Falling Rocks" and to the left, a canal, followed by the Delaware River. Outside it was foggy and white, as if the world had been hidden behind a cloth. An ambulance passed me on my left. For a moment, I slowed, just enough to give it room and then kept going, trailing right behind it, my foot nearly touching the floor and the ambulance lights circling round and round my car.

I knew the sight too well. Four months earlier I'd seen the same lights circle round my living room walls. My husband and I had been in the middle of a conversation —"I want you to know," he'd said, and then fell, halfway through his sentence, the siren echoing up and down the neighborhood, a family across the street, stepping outside to

watch. I took this as a sign. As if the ambulance had passed me for a reason, reminding me that somehow the world would fix itself, and just like my husband, everything would be OK.

I was nervous. So I guess I needed something like that to believe in. I'd never been religious, but I knew there was a God. Anyone who says otherwise has never felt what I have. At times the world feels perfectly in order. It doesn't last for long, but now and then I know, without a doubt in my mind, that everything is where it's meant to be. I could feel it then, as I raced down River Road. Even as the ambulance swerved, I felt it, the temporary moment of being exactly where I should. It wasn't until brake lights appeared that the thought of stopping made more sense than the order of things. Because there it was, a car, no more than thirty yards away with its lights pointed back at me. I tried to stop, but there was no avoiding what would happen next: the screeching of tires, the smell of burnt rubber, and metal-on-metal: the feel, the sound, the taste of it, too. I hit the car.

The other driver stepped out first. She must have been nineteen or twenty, wearing khaki pants and a t-shirt, her hair tied back in a bun. I thought she'd cry, the way she walked toward me with her hands up by her mouth. Instead she looked over the damage. Her trunk was bent, the brake lights broken. The hood of my car jutted upward at the front. I couldn't tell if I saw smoke or just more fog. I stayed seated. I didn't know why. A part of me wanted to get out and look with her. Another part wanted to wait. Like it would all just disappear if I sat there long enough: the girl, the car, the

damage to my hood, or that it would reverse itself, go backward in time—and I'd find myself behind the ambulance again.

The girl knocked on my window. I cracked the door open.

"We should get off the road," she said.

"Why?"

"It's too foggy to sit here. We're like ducks."

"Is your car gonna start?"

"It better," she said, and stayed for a moment, searching my eyes, a kind of pitifulness in her stance, her demeanor—a helplessness maybe—either side of her mouth bent downward. She held back the tears, but they were pushing, her eyes becoming cloudy, her cheeks puffy.

"We can exchange information," I said. "At the coffee shop in Point Pleasant."

"I know the one," she said and got back in her car. It started easily enough. So did mine. I drove behind her. The coffee shop was a quarter mile away and the girl turned on her flashers. I tried not to think. Now and then I could do it, to switch off my brain or distract it long enough to delay the thoughts that were pushing, just like the girl's tears, to reveal themselves. I was on the verge of screaming. Or yelling, of speeding up fast enough to run the girl back off the road, or of stopping and waiting, of hoping a car would come barreling down through the fog only to see me too late. I could feel the energy rising inside me, the panic—but I didn't know which form it would take. I didn't want to know. So instead I drove, slowly, my mind going the same pace. The clock in

my car showed four-ten. He'd probably left. I could call him, I thought. What was the point? If we were supposed to make it work, he needed more than a call. A part of me felt relieved. Like I could finally tell him: no, you're wrong, we were never going to make it work. And another part could hear the confidence, "Let's see what we can do," his deep, masculine voice on the other end of the telephone: well, maybe you're right, I'd tell him, let's see—and then the coffee shop appeared, a brick building no more than a block away, with a sign that said Cappuccino, and beneath it: "Play Here! Pennsylvania Powerball." The girl turned into the parking lot, and I parked just to her right.

As she stepped out of the car, she wiped both of her cheeks.

"Were you crying?"

She shot me a funny look. I wasn't sure why I'd asked.

The girl bent down, ran her fingers along her trunk and shook her head. Her license plate said "JMPNG CW."

"Is that where you work?" I said, trying to get her to talk.

"Where?"

"The Jumping Cow?"

She didn't answer.

"Well, my son works here," I began. "He'll give us a cup of coffee. For free, even."

Again, she said nothing. A part of me wanted to leave her here. The damage wasn't so bad. At least she could drive home. All I had to do was give her my

information. Plus, there was probably some rule about weather, how no one would be at fault. Especially on a road like that. I told her this, but she shook her head instead.

"You don't understand," she began. "This is my uncle's car."

"I'm sure it's insured," I told her.

"The problem is," she said, water building in her eyes. "He didn't know I had it."

"You took it?"

The girl nodded.

"He'll forgive you," I said, as if I had a clue.

"But that's the thing," she said, looking down at her hands. "He might not," and tried to collect herself. "'Cause I was getting the hell away."

—

Roland, my son, poured us two cups of coffee and set them on the table. He wore an apron over his shirt and jeans I'd never seen. I told him, "Thanks." We hadn't spoken much lately. In a week, he'd turn seventeen. I mentioned all this to the girl. I didn't think she heard.

"He's served me before," she said, but with little interest.

A man held a newspaper at the counter while Roland cleaned a machine. His boss stepped out from back. She held a liter of milk and her arms were covered in tattoos, one of a microphone and the other: two hands that looked like they were praying.

The girl and I sat beside a tall rack of birthday cards.

"So," I said, trying to find her eyes. "Is that all you're gonna tell me?"

The girl shrugged. "Maybe."

"Then why are we here?"

"Because you rammed me with your car."

A part of me wanted to laugh.

"OK," I said. "But if you wanna talk, my name's Denise." I sipped my coffee.

The girl looked off, in the direction of my son. I couldn't tell what she was thinking. I'd always assumed girls liked Roland. But the way she followed him with her eyes, watching him, almost scowling—I'd say it looked more like disdain.

"He's not very friendly," she said, eventually.

"Who, Roland?"

"Whatever his name is."

I wanted to correct her. But she kept talking instead.

"Everyone's got their differences," she continued. "So don't tell me I'm wrong. He isn't my son."

This time, I did laugh. It seemed to put her at ease. Finally, she took a sip of coffee.

"The crazy thing is," she said. "I barely even know why I did it."

"What do you mean?"

"It's not like I planned on leaving. It just happened, you know? A feeling I had, once my uncle left for church." She glanced down at her watch. "He's with his friends now. They go to mass at five. You know the little one on New Street?"

I nodded.

"They go to mass at five, and then eat at a restaurant. Like a support group or something. I started thinking about it. OK, he won't be back till eight. Maybe nine. His friends picked him up, so his car was just sitting there. I got in it, you know?"

"Did he do something wrong?"

She shook her head. "Not really."

"Then why'd you wanna leave?"

"It was just a feeling, you know? Like—" and she thought about it a moment. "Like I could get a fresh start. If that makes any sense."

"Of course." I wasn't sure how much to tell her. Or if it was right to speak at all. "If you wanna go, you still have time."

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe it was a wake-up call."

"The accident?"

"I guess." She let a spoon fall in the coffee cup. "You know what I was thinking, the moment you hit me?"

I waited for her to go on.

"I thought, holy shit. What the hell am I doing?"

"Really?" I wanted her to tell me more.

"If that's not a wake-up call, I don't know what is."

Roland came over with a couple of bagels, sliced down the middle and a plate of cream cheese. "On the house," he told us. His boss, with her tattooed arms, smiled at us.

"Tell her thanks," I said and turned right back to the girl. "Maybe what you should call it is a sign."

—

The night my husband collapsed, the two of us had gotten into an argument. "I want you to know," Pat began—and then stopped talking. I must have run the scene through my mind a thousand times, wondering what he would have told me. Even as he laid there, on the floor, I couldn't help imagining the next few words. A part of me considered it a blessing. That if his heart hadn't given out, he would have said something I'd hear the rest of my life, over and over. It would have been about love. How he'd never felt it for me, or that he had, but lost it. We were discussing whether to stay together. I'd known for years about a woman he saw. He'd promised to move on. Finally, that night I confronted him.

"I know you still see her," I said, even with Roland in the other room. I couldn't take it any longer, couldn't help but blurt it out, regardless of whether he heard. Pat, of course, used it against me. Said it proved that I'd changed, that years ago I never would have yelled with Roland around. Said I had no grasp on my feelings, no grasp on emotions, and that's when he told me, "I want you to know," and maybe I should have found it ironic that he'd said all that and then grasped for his own heart, but all I could do was wait, even as Roland rushed past me, reaching for his father's arms, begging me to do something, begging me to call, "God damn it, just call," his voice, ringing throughout

our home, “God damn it,” and moments later, the lights came circling round and round our living room walls.

—

After Roland set the bagels down, he reached for a chair and sat between the girl and me. He asked her how we knew each other. Once she explained it, he shook his head and blinked his eyes, like her words hadn’t registered.

“Wait—you mean, she hit you?” he asked.

“Well, the ambulance came first,” she said. “So I pulled over and—”

“And she couldn’t stop?”

“I guess not.”

Roland shot me a look.

“Is that true?”

I shrugged.

“God damn it,” he said, and then collected himself. “You know, I’m not surprised.”

“You’re not?” I asked.

He shook his head. For a moment I thought he was setting me up. Like he was hoping to start something, to fight and then discuss it—to clear the air—or whatever he’d call it.

“Why aren’t you surprised?” I asked.

“Now’s not the time.”

"No, you can say it."

When he didn't, I leaned in toward the girl.

"It's 'cause he thinks I've lost it."

Roland didn't answer.

"Ever since that night. Since his father had a heart attack."

"Mom—"

"Let me finish."

Roland glanced at the girl, as if afraid she'd hear too much.

"He thinks I wanted his dad to die. Isn't that right?"

His boss watched us while wiping down a coffee mug.

"That's why you're not surprised. Because you think I'm crazy or something. Like I was happy when he collapsed."

Roland opened his mouth, but thought better of it.

"You can talk," I said. "Isn't that what we're doing?"

He shook his head and got up from the table. The legs of his chair made a screeching sound. At the same time, his boss came over, scratching one of her tattoos.

"Is everything all right?"

"We're just talking," I told her.

She put a hand on Roland's shoulder, as if to guide him back toward the counter.

"I'm his mother, you know."

"He told me."

A part of me expected her to shake my hand. Or introduce herself at least. Not that we needed it. I'd heard her name before. Melanie. Roland mentioned her now and then. She was twenty-five and smoked two cigarettes in the afternoon. Roland thought it was funny, the way she stepped outside like clockwork, once at two, and again at four-thirty. It was four-forty-five right now. If I took a deep breath, I could smell it on her. It wasn't very professional. I wondered what Roland had said about me. The way she searched my eyes, I assumed the worst.

The girl, still seated at the table, rocked her legs up and down. Melanie asked if we wanted anything else and I shook my head. She left alongside Roland.

It was quiet for a moment. Then the girl sipped her coffee.

I adjusted my chair so we were close again.

"The truth is, I wasn't happy when he fell," I said.

"Excuse me?"

"I wasn't. Not like Roland thinks."

The girl didn't answer.

"Happy makes it sound one-sided. Like I was hoping for it, or something." I made sure to keep my voice down. "But it was the last thing I expected."

The girl glanced at Roland.

"I was shocked," I said. "I mean, here we are yelling about a woman he sees, and the next thing I know, he's on the floor. How was I supposed to react?"

She reached for a spoon and stirred her coffee. It had already gone cold.

"It was strange, you know? Seeing someone like that, lying there, and you're watching. Not knowing what to think. Almost like you don't care."

"Did he die?" asked the girl.

I shook my head.

"Then it's fine. You can both move on."

I glanced over my shoulder. Melanie wrote something on a notepad. The man still read the paper. Roland turned on a coffee grinder.

"But that's what I'm trying to tell you," I said. "I promised myself not to be like him."

"OK," she said, but it sounded more like a question.

"I think we were supposed to collide."

"Supposed to?"

I nodded.

"Right before I hit you, do you know where I was headed?"

She waited for me to go on.

"I was trying to make it work," I said. "But not with my husband." When she gave me a funny look, I added, "I was off to meet a man, God damn it."

—

No matter how many times I ran the scene through my mind—Pat on the ground and Roland running toward him—I always felt something new, as if experiencing it for the first time. Normally, if I thought about it long enough, a word would pop into my

head. Like anger or fear. Once, I thought relief. But a month after he fell, I closed my eyes, and the only word that appeared was jealousy. And for whatever reason, it stuck. You're jealous. That's what I told myself. Jealous he had a woman. Jealous he'd defended someone other than me. I always knew he saw her—her meaning Barbara. I'd heard the name a million times, mostly from my own mouth, repeating it in the mirror: Barbara, Barbara, Barbara. It was strange. When I pictured her, she was beautiful. I knew what she looked like. She was a little woman with dirty-brown hair. I never thought much when I saw her. But it was those times at night, just after I closed my eyes, that I remembered how mad he got, how no matter what I did to break her down, he raised her right back up. So in that way, she was beautiful. Infallible, almost. He must have thought so anyway. And as I pictured him lying there, gasping for breath and holding his chest, I couldn't help but think that after all these years, Pat had finally found love.

And then I wondered: why hadn't I?

A friend of mine told me about the accountant. He was tall and handsome, she said, and then asked why I'd stayed with Pat. I didn't have a good answer. So I told her for Roland's sake, but she knew that wasn't true. You don't believe that, she said. Why don't you just tell me? But I couldn't. Not what I really believed: that the answer all along was convenience. That I'd spent so long seeing past the other woman I no longer considered her a problem; that in a way, I could thank her for taking him now and then, for giving me space when I needed it, time when I didn't want to see him, and how could

I let anyone know that but me? Even I couldn't accept it, arguing with him, like we did that night, as if momentarily coming to my senses, only to realize I'd been wrong all along. If you're going to stick with him, my friend had said, why give him the satisfaction? Wouldn't you rather prove you're capable of finding someone, too? And from that point on, I couldn't think of it as anything else, that the accountant, who I still hadn't seen, was somehow intertwined with Pat, with our problems and my hope that someday we'd overcome it all, and really, how could I not look for some kind of sign, when a faceless man had become interchangeable with the thought of my husband lying on the kitchen floor?

—

Finally the girl pushed her coffee away.

"I don't know if I can believe that."

"Think about it," I said. "What would have happened if we didn't crash?"

She shook her head. "I probably would have just turned around."

"Really?"

"Eventually. I mean—where would I have gone?"

I wanted her to figure it out on her own. I could tell she was smart. Stubborn, too. She adjusted the watch on her wrist and reached for her coffee once more, but thought better of it.

For a moment, she looked at Roland. "Does he know where you were going?"

"Of course not."

"Well, don't you think he should?"

I didn't know what she meant.

"I mean," she began and then scanned the edge of our table, like something about it disappointed her. "I feel sorry for him, if you wanna know the truth."

I couldn't help but laugh.

"I'm serious. At least he knows what his dad's doing. But here you are, going behind their backs—"

"I didn't do anything," I said. "That's my point. That's why we needed to collide."

The girl scoffed.

"What?"

"I told you what I think," she said. "Sooner or later, he's gonna figure it out. Wouldn't you rather tell him yourself?"

I wasn't sure I did.

The girl got up.

"Anyway," she said.

"Are you leaving?"

"I guess so." Before she pushed her chair back, she looked at me and paused. There was something she wanted to say. Or that she knew, or could infer, that she understood, or—I asked her what it was. But she thought better of it and turned, and

even as I watched her go, I couldn't help but think she was right. She stopped at the counter and said something to Roland.

He came toward me with a rag and wiped the girl's side of the table. "Well," I said, but he ignored me, even as I cleared my throat. Maybe this was how it would always be. It seemed inevitable. That eventually there'd come a time when we'd go our separate ways. Not that we'd accept it. Or look back and be happy—that word again—or feel thankful that it worked the way it did, a million miles parts apart. But that's what we'd do. Go. We'd been leading to that moment for months now. Maybe it would come sooner than I thought.

"Can you look at me?" I asked. "There's something I wanna tell you."

Roland reached across for the coffee mug. For a moment, I watched him work.

"Do you think I'm like your father?"

He shrugged.

"Because I don't wanna be."

"OK," he said.

"I always promised myself I wouldn't."

This time he stopped wiping the table.

"Always?"

I hadn't expected him to ask.

"Well. Maybe not always."

"Then when?"

The man with the paper got up and left.

"I guess since—"

Roland cleared his throat.

"Since Barbara," he said, interrupting me.

I thought about it a moment.

"Don't you agree?" he asked. "You were mad, I was mad."

I nodded.

"But that was just a few years ago. So don't tell me always."

"OK, I'm sorry."

He shook his head.

"Of all the things to worry about—not being like him? Maybe you should think about forgiving each other instead. Some nights I dream that you do."

"Is that what you want?"

"Sometimes," he said, and then corrected himself. "I don't know. I just can't figure out how you forgot it all. Like everything you felt for him disappeared. But how could there not be something left?"

"There is," I said.

"Are you sure?"

I tried to convince myself, if for nothing more than to convince him in return. He waited for my answer. But even then I couldn't give him one.

Melanie called him over.

"The thing is, I forgive you," he said, with the coffee mug in hand. "Whether you know it or not, I always have."

—

At 5:30, I went out to my car. A mile up the road was New Street, with a little church on the corner and a sign: "When You're Here, You're Home." A group of people stood outside. One of them was the girl. She crossed her arms, while a man inspected the brake lights on her car. He must have been her uncle. I'd seen him before. He scooped ice cream at the Jumping Cow, not too far from here. I used to take Roland there on summer nights. Pat, too. The three of us would order the same thing: two scoops of Rocky Road in a cup, with a sugar cone on top. We hadn't been back in years. I decided to pull in. "Need any help?" I asked, but the girl waved me on. I figured she'd given her uncle a different story. So I pulled around back.

I let my car run for awhile. I glanced once at the church, then tried to focus on something else. Maybe I'd just go home. The church was small. Finally, I turned my car off and got out, if only for a moment. I considered going in. The side door was open. I figured it couldn't hurt. I went toward the door and looked in. Inside were six rows of pews and a long gray carpet, running from the entrance to the altar. A man sat in the second row, with his hands against his lap. He smiled my way. Something about him relaxed me. His hair was short and gray and he wore a collared shirt. He must have been eighty years old and asked if I was there for mass.

"Is there another one?"

He nodded. “Two more. One at six, and another at seven.” He stopped to look me over. “Normally I know everyone here.”

“I’m just passing through,” I said.

“I can tell. Welcome.”

The ceiling paint was chipped. He offered me a seat beside him, and I stepped inside.

“I like to get here early,” he said. “So I have time to look around.”

I looked, too. The carpet was stained in spots, and the Bible he held, dog-eared.

The two of us didn’t say much more. Eventually, people started filing in. Some of them said hi to the man beside me. They called him Mark. Then a woman, about his age, sat down to his left. Mark introduced her as his wife. Her name was Jeanne, and they’d been married for fifty-five years. Jeanne asked if I was married myself. I told her yes, with one child. She smiled and said, “God bless you,” and the priest got up and spoke. He began with a story about a little old woman in a grocery store. How he’d seen her in the produce aisle, and after they talked for a moment, the little old woman couldn’t remember why she’d come. The priest tried to help her, going through the list of fruits and vegetables, but none of them rang a bell. Ultimately, there was nothing the priest could do. After all, he said, it was the little old woman’s job to find an answer. Only she could ever know what brought her there. People seemed to like that sort of thing.

“It sounds like she had Alzheimer's,” I said, but Mark shot me a funny look.

"Is that really what you think?" And before I had the chance to nod, I thought: of course not, and repeated it in my mind, of course not, of course not, of course there must be more.

CHAPTER II

THE GIRL'S STORY

Uncle Leon had called it an ultimatum but that's not what it was and chances were, he didn't believe it himself. It was said out of panic more than anything—"What is this, some kind of ultimatum?"—pacing through the living room overtop the orange checkered rug that lay beside the couch. Finley watched him from the dinner table. She might have kept her mouth shut if she knew he'd take it like this. But there was something about the mail she'd gotten that day, a postcard from Deb with a picture of a sprawling white beach and children in the water playing and splashing and on the other side, the words, "I still think of you, honey" written in cursive, and underneath it all, "je t'aime." At first, she thought it was phony. Just Deb trying to play a part, the cultured woman type, until an hour or two went by, and Finley pulled it out again, this time to notice a stamp in the upper right hand corner with the word Marseille in faded blue ink, a slight smudge from someone's fingertip. That's when it clicked: the postcard traveled farther than she ever had, from the south of France, then north to Paris, and over, across the ocean, probably to New York City and by car to Point Pleasant, Pennsylvania.

She could have interpreted it a million different ways. One was to get out. She'd tried before, to leave Point Pleasant behind and go somewhere new. But after holding the postcard, then putting it down and picking it back up, what struck her next was the

handwriting: the long sprawling cursive, “je t’aime” and “I still think of you, honey,” the elegance of it, the strength, the control, the fact that it was written by a woman she knew. It moved her. It was exciting. And she repeated it in her mind, a woman, a woman, it was written by a woman, until she made her way down the stairs, saw Uncle Leon watching TV, and said, “I’d like to meet my mother.”

Uncle Leon turned the TV down.

“You don’t have one anymore,” he said.

But she didn’t mean Deb. “I don’t mean Deb,” she told him, and let the words settle for awhile. She knew what he’d try first. He’d let the room go silent. Normally, that was enough to make her drop whatever it was she wanted. But if not, he’d turn his head to the windows, the ones opposite her, and make himself seem hopeless, used-up, before scratching the bristles on his chin and adjusting his jeans while slouching further on the couch. She counted each step. Once the room went silent, he turned, toward the windows, and reached up, for his chin.

“I’m not gonna drop it,” she said. “I’m serious.”

He looked past her eyes and said it surprised him, if she wanted to know the truth. But the truth was, it didn’t, and Finley knew that. Uncle Leon had come to expect the worst from everything. And that was putting it lightly—“Our lives are different now,” she told him, and by “now” she meant six months after things changed. Six months earlier, The Jumping Cow was the number one selling ice cream stand in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. In fact, Uncle Leon had considered changing their slogan—*Get Your Ice*

Cream at the Ice Cream Stand—because a stand implied something small. The Jumping Cow wasn't small anymore. It was a business, a store, a goddamn way of life as he put it, a six-figure money-maker for six straight years. During one of those years, Uncle Leon met Deb. Finley didn't know which. Maybe three or four years ago. It didn't matter. What mattered, at least looking back on it now, was that the Jumping Cow had already become successful. It happened fast: Uncle Leon met Deb. They dated. Then Deb moved in. "It'll be good to have a female influence," he'd told Finley. For awhile, it was. If only they could have lived like this forever. Then Deb's sister called from France.

The sister, named Martha, had been living in Marseille since their parents died. According to Deb, she couldn't take the loneliness anymore. Originally, Martha had moved to get away from it all, to clear her mind, but now she needed someone she loved nearby. Deb packed her bags and asked to borrow a little money. Uncle Leon saw no problem with that. He said The Jumping Cow was doing better than ever, and she kissed him goodbye and Finley goodbye, and then caught a plane to visit. Be back in a week, she said. In a week, she asked for a little more time and a little more money, and every now and then, Uncle Leon sent her a little more than she needed, until a month went by, and Deb finally admitted: I won't be coming back. At first, Uncle Leon blamed himself. He paced through the house, like he did right now, over the orange checkered rug, venting his frustrations to Finley: Maybe, he began, if we'd gotten married, she would have stayed. Or if I'd done something more. For months, he tried to plan his next move.

In March, he temporarily closed The Jumping Cow, put a little sign in the window, "Undergoing Construction," and by June, when he decided to start again, the accounts showed less than he expected. He'd given Deb too much: a thousand here, a thousand there, his last big attempt to win her back. And that's when he vented about something else. Women. How all his life he'd never known one to act on anything but greed. She used me, he said. Occasionally, he'd catch himself: Listen, this is just my way of coping, don't take it personally. But for awhile, Finley agreed. How many women had done anything for her? Her mother gave her up when she was born. Deb had used them for money. Who was left? Maybe, if it weren't for the postcard, she would have always believed that. But then it came, and there was sincerity in Deb's words, "I still think of you." If Deb wanted to disappear, she could. They were on opposite ends of the world. So why send it? Finley must have meant something to her, that's why. And as she passed the postcard between her hands, she wondered if the women she'd been told to dislike were not so bad after all.

"You never wanted to see her before," said Uncle Leon, standing up and pacing. Finley pressed her feet against the floor to make herself feel steady.

"I didn't think she mattered."

"But she does now?"

"I'm not sure."

Finally, after stomping his feet, Uncle Leon sat back down on the couch.

"Just give me some time to think," he said. "It sounds a hell of a lot like an ultimatum." But Finley had already reached for the phone and tossed it his way.

—

They planned on meeting her at The Jumping Cow. It was a little before six on a Wednesday afternoon. Finley had spent the day inside it, cleaning machines, the freezers, while Uncle Leon put a new coat of paint on the outside walls. They were getting the place ready to sell. A few people had shown interest, including an old competitor named Bob who years ago had been driven out of business, but was ready to start again. As of now, no one had made a high enough offer. So each day, the two of them came back for to scrub the insides, the outsides, posting flyers around town and online. They'd sell it on their own. But for now, it sat there, four white walls and a roof that needed fixing and a big metal sign with the words, "The Jumping Cow," that would probably start to rust. Across the road was a farmland and barn, and to the right of the barn, a development with a long row of houses that looked no different than the next.

A car came from around the bend. Uncle Leon sat on one of the picnic tables, and watched the road, wiping dirt off his shirt. The car slowed, put on its blinker and turned into the parking lot. Finley's hands began to shake. Its windows were down, and a woman sat in the passenger seat. She looked young: mid-to-late thirties, with a pair of wire rimmed glasses and thin rosy cheeks. She was pretty, and she smiled at both of them. For a moment, she sat there, as if expecting one of them to say something. When they didn't, she cleared her throat.

"Are you folks open?" she asked.

Uncle Leon studied her, then shook his head.

"Well, that's too bad. Our kid's in the mood for ice cream."

Uncle Leon shrugged and went back to watching the road.

The woman frowned and turned to Finley. She wore red lipstick and the man behind the wheel let the car idle, the distant sound of talk radio in the dashboard. Finley's heart steadied. It's not her, she thought. The kid, who must have been the woman's son, sat in back strapped to a baby seat. The woman watched Finley closely. For a moment it seemed they shared each other's disappointment: for the woman, not getting her child ice cream; and for Finley, the momentary hope that her mother would drive an Acura. Eventually, the car took off.

The truth was, Finley had spent most of the day wondering just that: what kind of car her mother drove. After all, it would be the first thing she'd see, as it rounded the bend, probably from the left, coming northward. But no matter how many ways she pictured it, each time she came back to the same cloudy image: a missing hubcap or broken bumper, peeled paint along the sides, and that the woman in it would look rundown and tired, unable to say more than a few words before asking for space. At least that's how Uncle Leon had made it seem. "Don't fall for her games," he'd told her, while painting The Jumping Cow. "She could get inside my head at five years old. I can't imagine how she does it now."

The next time a car pulled in Uncle Leon said, “Here she is.” It was clean and white, and the woman who stepped out looked young, even younger than the woman before, with two long hoop earrings and a v-neck blouse. She approached Finley first, the corners of her mouth angled downward, as if ready to cry. She took Finley by the shoulders and searched her eyes.

“My baby?” she said.

Uncle Leon stood back and watched.

The woman smelled like perfume and coffee grinds. She reached for Finley’s face and held it in her hands. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Say you’re happy,” said Uncle Leon.

The woman closed her eyes and tears ran down her cheeks.

Finley didn’t know if she should wipe them off or look away. So instead, she said, “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

The woman stepped back, her eyes wide and growing. She released a long, uneven breath and glanced at Uncle Leon. “I never thought this would happen.”

“Neither did I,” he said.

The woman studied Finley a little longer. Then Finley asked what she’d like to be called.

“Well,” the woman began. “For now, why don’t you call me Lilah?”

—

Lilah took Finley's hands and commented on how smooth they were, before looking at The Jumping Cow. Somehow she seemed impressed. "So this is yours," she said.

"All ours," said Uncle Leon. "Would you like a tour?"

The place was small: two take-out windows and a dozen empty parking spots. They made their way around back, to the door that said Employees Only. Finley took the keys from her pocket and the three of them stepped inside. "Look at us," said Lilah. "Like VIPs. I never knew you were such a businessman." Uncle Leon dismissed her. He still hadn't said what happened. Even when he called her, he hadn't alluded to it or said anything—not a word about the money or the fact that they were selling. Finley figured he would. That he was trying to find the right time or best way to say it. It wasn't her job to deliver bad news anyway. Now and then he mentioned Deb, and Lilah would say, oh, I'm sorry, that must be tough. But as for the paint in the corner and cleaning supplies, he moved them right along. "We're doing some light repairs," he said, and paused to look around the place. "I guess you could call it my baby," without ever breaking the confidence in his eyes. Finley tried to grab his attention, but he turned.

"So you two manage it," said Lilah.

"Some others help," he said. "But not the way Finley does. She's been working here for nine years."

"Is that right?"

"When she was ten, she started working the counter. Even counted the tips. Divided them up. Told our customers hello and have a nice day."

"I bet you got more tips because of that."

"Oh, she got a real following. I mean, these people watched her grow up. From working the counter, to managing the place."

"Have you been a manager for long?"

"For four years," Uncle Leon said on her behalf. "Ever since she was fifteen. Probably the youngest manager in Bucks County. Truth is, I needed someone I could trust. I'd heard about these places going out of business 'cause some punk kid stole money. If it weren't for her, I might have lost this place years ago."

"I believe it," said Lilah.

"She knows it, of course." This time, he glanced at her. "I make sure she hears it."

It was true, he did, how important it was for her to contribute. For awhile she took his compliments as just that: compliments. Like when he said he would have lost the place years ago—well, years ago, he'd said the same thing, and she believed it, word-for-word promising to work as much as she could. Occasionally, she wondered what it would have been like if she'd asked to do something else. Sometimes she laid awake imaging their conversation, whispering to herself: I think it's time I move on, Uncle Leon; and answering in a slightly deeper voice: but don't you think you're needed here? Eventually she'd turn her head and say, in the deeper voice: You're right, Finley, and then

she'd close her eyes, thinking tomorrow would be the day. But tomorrow would come, and every time, she knew it wouldn't work like that. Maybe if Uncle Leon were a woman, she could have approached him easier. That he would have been more open to a dialogue—but then Deb came along and echoed whatever he said.

"Anyway," said Lilah. "I was hoping we could go out and celebrate."

Uncle Leon shook his head.

"Oh, come on."

"We have food waiting."

"Really?"

"Well," he said, and paused. "What I mean is, we got leftovers."

"Leftovers?" Lilah turned to Finley, as if trying to get in on the joke. "On a night like this?"

Uncle Leon didn't budge.

"Just for tonight," he told her.

And eventually Lilah said, "Fine," but the conversation had already ended.

—

Uncle Leon poured them each a glass of wine. Lilah took hers to the couch and as she passed the orange checkered rug commented on how ugly it was and out of place, too, but laughed while saying it, as if to be sure no one took her seriously.

Across the living room was the dinner table. Finley grabbed one of the chairs and sipped her wine slowly. It was Merlot. Uncle Leon said he'd join them in a bit but went

upstairs first. His footsteps echoed above their heads. He was pacing again. Lilah pretended not to hear him. "I wonder if he'll need help with the leftovers," she said, swirling her glass and rolling her eyes. "At least the wine is good."

"He's had it for ages."

"It's funny, he hasn't changed one bit. Even as a kid, I'd pick one thing, my brother would choose the other."

Finley watched her and sipped.

"I think it's about being in control. Our father was like that, too."

"Really?"

Lilah nodded. "Made you think they had a plan. Sometimes they did, sometimes they didn't. But after looking you in the eyes, you believed them every time."

"Hmm," said Finley, but what she meant was: I understand. How Uncle Leon had said, "She'll be back," after it was clear Deb would never return, and yet for a moment, Finley thought, maybe he's right.

"Anyway," said Lilah. "He's good at keeping up appearances," and then laughed. "Look at me trying to tell you who he is. As if I know him better than you." She shook her head and smiled. "He's always been a mystery, though. You know what he said when you were born?"

The sound of his footsteps disappeared.

"No."

"He said if I'm gonna raise her, then you can't interfere." Lilah glanced at a painting on the wall. It was a Monet. One of the ones with a bridge and lily pads. "I mean, it made sense. I had you so young, it was only right for him to take you. Our parents didn't want another kid. And Leon was a lot older. Twenty-eight or twenty-nine."

"Twenty-eight," said Finley.

"Right, see there you go. He'd been out of the house for years. So I hardly saw him as it was. But once he took you in, we talked every day. I'd call him to see how you were doing. It was nice. He and I, talking for the first time. I mean, about real things. For awhile I thought we'd get close. But I had my life, he had his. I was still in high school and my brother was always so private. So I called him one day and said, you know you're right. I won't interfere."

Finley shook her head. "I'm not looking for an excuse."

"Oh, I know," said Lilah. "I'm just trying to set the picture straight," and glanced again at the Monet. "That's not real is it?"

"It's a print."

Lilah laughed. "Could have fooled me," she said and looked around the room, as if hoping someone else might carry the conversation. Finley knew she'd been quiet. And distant—and yet in her mind, she imagined there'd come a time when she could say anything, that even in a couple of minutes they would achieve some kind of trust, simply by being mother and daughter, and they'd talk, really talk, the way Lilah had just

described. But for now, she sat and waited, too, the two of them at opposite ends of the living room, while footsteps resumed upstairs. All she wanted was to connect. A mother seemed like a good place to start. But it was strange, looking at her, smelling her perfume. Until now, all Finley had known of her was two pictures: one when Lilah was four, sitting on a stack of Christmas presents, and another at five, in Leon's arms as he graduated high school. That was it. And now here she was, a grown woman, as if simply by arriving tonight, she became real. Uncle Leon had said not to get too comfortable, that her mother was an expert manipulator, but the truth was, she'd never felt comfortable with anyone. Maybe that wasn't true. There were times when she could feel it. But in her mind, being comfortable required some kind of consistency. When Deb finally arrived, Finley had already known a long list of Uncle Leon's girlfriends. She didn't like to remind him of it, but before Deb, a woman named Sheila had lived with them for a year. Then Sheila got a job offer in San Francisco, and Uncle Leon decided to stay here. And before Sheila were others who'd come to dinner or spend the night. Uncle Leon had seemed to forget all that. Like when he asked, "How could she leave me?" referring to Deb, Finley wondered if he'd erased the past from his mind, and if there was ever going to be some kind of consistency in their lives, maybe what they needed was blood, someone who could not escape their connection, no matter what got in the way. It wasn't right for Uncle Leon to say don't get comfortable—because maybe all she ever needed was just that, at least for a moment, to say something aloud that she'd always thought to keep to herself.

Finally, she leaned in, the same as Lilah and kept her voice down.

"That place we showed you," she said. "We're selling it."

"I know."

Finley blushed. "You do?"

"Well, sure. I mean, where were all the people?"

"If it were up to me, I would have told you."

"I know you would."

"It's hard," said Finley. "Now I don't know what to do."

Lilah nodded, as Uncle Leon came down the stairs. "That's why I'm here," she said. "So we can talk. Isn't that what mothers are for?"

—

When Finley was six, Uncle Leon took her kayaking on the Delaware River. They rented a boat with two seats and a couple of paddles, before making their way down to the river ramp, a quarter mile from their house. For awhile, they let the current take them. Then Finley asked where the river went. To the ocean, said Uncle Leon. She asked how long it would take to get there, and when he said too long for this trip, she grabbed her paddle and pushed the water back as fast as she could. He rowed along with her. "And where does the ocean go?" she asked. He said it went everywhere. That once you got to the ocean, you could go any place in the world. Sometimes, when she tried to remember what happened, she imagined they made it. That at noon they reached the

ocean and rowed across to Spain; and in Spain they ate at a little place on a side street, before rowing back in time for bed.

Once, when she was eight, she tied two shoes together and threw them into the river. Someday, she decided, they'd end up on someone else's feet. Maybe someone from Iceland. Maybe from China. Now and then she wrote little notes and folded them into sandwich bags. They usually said something about her. How she was nine or ten or eleven years old, and a fact, like: *My Uncle Leon and I live on 42 Waterbury Street*. Or *I play the piano, but not very well. I'm working on it.* The day Sheila moved to San Francisco, she wrote a note meant to follow her. *I think it would have been nice if we went with you*, it said. She dropped it into the river and watched it go. She knew it probably wouldn't find her. But there was always a hope—until months went by and Sheila didn't answer. Not a phone call or letter in return. So she wrote a note to her mother on a night when she'd stormed up the stairs to her room: *I know you called Uncle Leon. He said you want to see me. But I don't want to see you. I told him no and he was happy. He said it's for the best.* She signed her name and *Age 11*, then folded it into a bag. At the ramp she threw it as far as she could. It drifted awhile, and she watched it go. She imagined her mother opening it, how excited she'd be, seeing her name at the bottom. And then she'd read it, and after reading, she'd take the note inside and sit down alone. Or maybe there would be a boyfriend. But the boyfriend wouldn't stay for long. He'd leave like all the others, Uncle Leon's voice saying, *She moves from one guy to the next*—and it was that image, of a man who'd watch her mother cry but wouldn't stay

forever, that forced Finley into the river. She grabbed the note. And once she got back to shore, she separated each word, tearing it into pieces, so none of the letters connected.

—

The leftovers were lasagna, which Uncle Leon said justified why they were eating leftovers in the first place since "lasagna always tastes better the next day." He opened a second bottle of wine and topped off their glasses. His lips were red and eyes slightly glazed. He rarely drank. Even when Deb left, he had nothing more than a beer once or twice a week. In a way, Finley wished he did drank. At one point, she even asked him to get a couple bottles of wine or a case of beer so they could sit down and talk about things. Of course he told her no. Chances were, that's why he didn't drink in the first place. So he wouldn't be tempted to talk.

Even now he wasn't talking. And it was clear he'd had more wine than he was used to, the way he dropped himself down on the love seat, loosely cradling the plate in his lap. The three of them sat in different corners of the room, and Uncle Leon reached for the remote. "Do you mind if I watch TV?" he asked and flipped through the channels, found something he seemed to like, a sitcom with a laugh track and turned the volume up.

Lilah cleared her throat.

Uncle Leon ignored her. He shoveled a forkful of lasagna down his throat and reached for his wine, taking bigs gulps with his feet up on the coffee table.

"I know what you're doing," said Lilah. "You're trying to drown me out."

He raised both of his hands, as if under arrest.

"Don't play dumb."

He said, "I'm not," and kept eating. Lilah tried taking a bite, too, then set her plate down.

"It's funny," she said. "I thought you forgave me. When you called me, I could have sworn you did."

"Forgave you for what?"

"You know what."

He looked at her with sauce in the corner of his lip.

"For nagging me at dinner?"

"For getting pregnant," she said.

He laughed, just a little.

"It's true," she told him. "I thought you did. But you haven't. You're still mad."

Uncle Leon turned to Finley. "Do I look mad to you?" and faked a smile.

"You're mad," she said. "Because it wasn't on your terms."

This time he dropped his fork so it made a sound as it hit the plate.

"It's true," she said. "Everything's gotta be part of your plan. That's why you work for yourself. Why you moved farther away when I gave you Finley. It's probably why you won't get a new job now."

He seemed to ignore the last part. "I'm surprised you wanna talk like this."

"Surprised?"

He nodded and picked up his fork. Then he took another big bite and another big sip. "Surprised the way you're trying to peel back the layers." He pretended to peel something, an imaginary orange. "Like you wanna teach her something."

"All I'm trying to do is talk."

"OK," he said. "Then talk."

"I am, that's what I'd doing."

"Uh-uh," he said. "You're only talking about me."

"I don't know what you mean."

He started shaking his head, shaking it, shaking it, finally turning his attention from the TV. "You haven't told her what you told me."

She made a face like he'd spoken a different language.

"On the phone," he said. And as Lilah shrugged, he mouthed the name, "Pe-ter," separating the syllables, saying it slowly, his eyes becoming wide: "Pe-ter," and before Finley had a chance to process the name, Lilah shifted in her seat and said, "OK, honey, there's something I have to tell you."

—

Why?

Finley considered asking. Instead she sat there, hoping her mother would feel the same way, that she would turn to Uncle Leon and say: Actually I don't have to tell her anything. Because what, after nineteen years, did anyone have to say? In a way, that was why she'd wanted to meet her mother in the first place: because they'd been apart for so

long that they could pretend to be whoever they wanted. And what was more comforting than that, for two people to talk openly, about anything that came to mind. She imagined her mother sitting there, the two of them alone, telling each other their hopes, their predictions, but avoiding what had dragged them down in the past: Sure, Mom, I know you made mistakes. But what do you want to do now? The more she got to know someone, the harder it was to say anything but the expected. In a perfect world, she and her mother would talk knowing hardly more than their names, maybe a couple of facts like the notes thrown out to sea: *Uncle Leon and I are selling The Jumping Cow*, just enough to explain how they'd gotten where they were, sitting in the living room, on opposite sides of the room.

"You don't have to tell me," she said.

"No," said Lilah. "He's right, I should," nodding, as if to convince herself. "I was gonna tell her, you know. You didn't have to embarrass me."

Uncle Leon waited for her to go on.

The grandfather clock ticked in the corner. Finley considered leaving. No one said she had to stay. Her glass was nearly empty. Lilah looked down at her hands.

"If there's one thing I've learned," she said. "It's that people change. You can write that down. That's the first thing your mother ever taught you." She smiled and tried getting Finley to smile, too. "People change, remember that."

"Go on," said Uncle Leon.

"What I'm trying to say is, I'm different now. If I kept you at fifteen, it never would have worked. You know that right?"

"That's not why I wanted you here," said Finley.

"I know," she said. "I know," whispering it a few times under her breath. "If I had you at twenty, well maybe—" She stopped herself again. "The thing is, I ran into your father ten years ago. Peter. Do you know that name?"

"I've heard it."

"Well, I ran into him. In the parking lot of a grocery store. And I guess you could say, he's one of the ones that changed. He looked good. Had a job. He asked me out for drinks."

"They ended up getting married," said Uncle Leon.

Lilah shot him a look. "Right," she said. "We got married."

"You and my dad?"

Lilah nodded, but said nothing. The grandfather clock still ticking, ticking—

"Does he know about me?" said Finley.

"Of course he knows."

"But did he know back then?"

She shook her head. "He was older than me. We went to different schools."

"It doesn't matter."

"The thing is—"

"Get to it," said Uncle Leon.

"We had a daughter." She scanned Finley's eyes, then looked back at her hands. "Another one, when we got married. Her name's Cheyanne. She and Peter are home right now."

"OK," said Finley.

"If you wanna know the truth, it's hard on me. Looking at Cheyanne and knowing you could have been her. People change. Families grow apart. But somehow ours came together, and you're not there."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I thought you'd be happy," she said. "You can meet them now. Cheyanne knows all about you."

"What does she know?"

"That you're her sister."

"What else?"

Lilah shook her head. "I'll never forgive myself, OK? Every time I look at her I see the person I hope she'll be and—" She exhaled, folded her hands into her lap. "Even though we don't talk much, your uncle mentions things now and then. And I know you didn't go to college, and that you still miss Deb, and well—I just hope Cheyanne gets what she wants. I think about where you are, and I wish I could have given you the same future."

For a moment, Finley closed her eyes and heard nothing but a distant voice. As if she'd jumped into the current, the muted sound of water rushing past her ears.

"Sometimes," Lilah said. "I lay awake, thinking it's my fault. That maybe I could have kept you through school. And now we'd all be together, the four of us He's got a good job. Cheyanne gets everything she needs. Like even last week," said Lilah and gave an example. She spoke for another minute. Or five, or ten. It didn't matter. Finley let her talk. She let her talk and talk, her feet pressed against the hardwood floor, the two of them on opposite sides of the room and at the end of it all, Lilah said, "I'm just happy I could tell you that."

Eventually Finley got up from her chair. "If you don't mind, I'd like a moment alone."

"Of course," said Lilah and Finley made her way upstairs. Her bedroom walls were light blue, the same color she and Uncle Leon had painted them years ago, and the postcard from Deb sat on her desk, just beyond the edge of her bed. From her window, she could see the river. The moon lay in the water, on its way slowly out to sea. Now and then she still wondered if her notes made it into someone else's hands. It was nice to think they did. That someone had found one of the bags and touched the same piece of paper she had. Maybe the ink would have smeared. And maybe the notes wouldn't have made it very far, a hundred yards upstream before washing onto the bank of a neighbor's house. Some of the lights were on, in little houses that lined the river. She counted eight of them. Eight quiet lights that lined the bank, mostly from people's living room windows. If any of them had gotten her notes, they probably would have recognized her name. Finley, they'd say. The girl from 42 Waterbury Street, who lives with her Uncle

Leon. The one who plays piano, but not very well. Who's worked at The Jumping Cow since she was ten. Who sometimes sits on the bank, watching the water as it goes to France and Spain, to India and Australia, and back again.

CHAPTER III

BARBARA'S STORY

Barbara's house was small and white and had a big bay window that looked out onto her gardens: one with flowers, the other, vegetables. It was nine o'clock in the morning and she'd just finished her second cup of coffee. On Saturdays, she'd pour herself a third and take it with her outside, before putting on a pair of gloves and getting down onto her knees and maintaining whatever it was that needed maintaining. Then she'd pick the vegetables that had gotten ripe and cut four bundles of flowers and bring them to her neighbors, who'd have money waiting and an empty vase on their dining room tables. Years ago, she took a bundle to each neighbor's house and left them on their doorsteps, until Ray, who lived two houses down, gave her money in return and William, who lived across from Ray, opened his door to talk for a moment and slipped her a twenty, as he brought the flower upstairs to his wife. Now everyone paid, some more, some less, and while she told them oh, no you don't have to, each time she accepted it, ten from Ray, twenty from William, another ten from Jim, and twenty-five from Mark. All four men were married and each Saturday morning, all four wives got flowers. Barbara had found a kind of belonging in the routine, an appreciation, even from the wives who she'd only met a few times since moving to the neighborhood three years ago. Most of them were older, in their sixties or seventies, and kept to themselves, but she

imagined they looked forward to the flowers each week, maybe even watching her as their husbands went outside to pay.

She hadn't missed a flower delivery, as William called it, since April. It was mid-July now. But rather than get up and put on her gloves, she set the mug down, and waited for Finley, who sat at the other end of her breakfast table, to finish eating. The girl took her time with a bowl of cereal that Barbara had forgotten, until this morning, was in her pantry.

"Is it stale?" she asked.

The girl shook her head. "I don't mind."

The night before, Barbara had gotten ready for bed when she heard someone knock at her door. It was a little past eleven. She assumed it was Pat, even called from the bedroom, "I wasn't expecting you tonight," and as she opened the door, the girl stood on her porch with a duffle bag in hand.

She was pretty and young and it looked like she'd been crying. She wore a long white shirt and a pair of blue jeans. "Do you remember me?" she'd asked. The front light was on and up the street Barbara's neighbors had either gone to sleep or were watching TV, a blue glow in one of Mark's windows, the rest of the lights turned off. "It's me," said the girl, "Finley."

A part of Barbara still didn't believe it was her—her meaning the girl she hadn't seen in at least twelve years, whose uncle had stopped asking Barbara to nanny for one reason or another. Bastard. Truth was, if Finley hadn't mentioned him last night,

Barbara wouldn't have believed her at all. "Uncle Leon said I could go, he knows I'm gone."

Finley's bowl of cereal was almost empty now, and she pressed the rim against her lips.

"Did you sleep all right?"

The girl nodded, but Barbara knew that wasn't true. She'd heard her get up in the middle of the night and step outside.

Finally, the girl finished her cereal. She wore the same white shirt from the night before.

"Do you need anything else?" Barbara asked.

The girl said no. A breeze crept in through the windows, and Barbara wondered if she should go about her normal routine. Her neighbors would be expecting her. Each week Ray sat out on his porch at nine-fifteen to watch her come down the street.

"You used to live right by us, didn't you?" said the girl.

"I only moved a few miles."

"Uncle Leon and I are in the same place still."

"Is he doing all right?"

"Not really."

The duffle bag still lay by the entrance. There must not have been much in it. At most, a few days of clothes. It was unzipped in the corner. Last night, the girl had grabbed a toothbrush when Barbara showed her the guest room. She considered asking

how long she planned to stay, but assumed it wouldn't be more than a night or two. She didn't mind the company. Or the mystery of it all. In a way, it was kind of exciting to have someone there. Other than Pat no one stayed. Now and then Barbara's parents would come from Florida and then head to her brother's place in New York state. But that was maybe twice a year. From what she remembered, Finley was a good talker and always gracious, looking her in the eyes and addressing her by name. The girl's eyes were down now. Of course she must have changed since then, but the last Barbara saw her—when Finley was six or seven years old—she couldn't help but think that the girl had loved her. And not loved in the way that kids looked up to grown-ups, but really, truly loved her, preferred her even, to her uncle. That could have been why Leon stopped hiring Barbara in the first place. The girl had no mother, and back then, he needed time alone to get his business started. It probably didn't sit too well that he'd come home and the girl would hardly greet him, clinging to Barbara who'd have to peel her off like a suction cup on a window, tugging with two arms until she budged. Truth was, Barbara loved the girl right back. Loved her innocence, her lack of confusion—and it was hard, in a way, to separate what she did from the money that she'd made. Each time she left, the girl would say, "I love you, Barbara," and Barbara would tell her, "I love you, too" while watching Leon write a check for all the hours she babysat.

The girl got up and put her bowl in the sink. She'd gotten tall and skinny. No longer the chubby cheeks and dimples, with little rolls on her arms when she curled up on the couch. She leaned her back against the sink and looked Barbara over.

"You look the same," said the girl, trying to smile. It was the first she had all morning. "I hoped you would."

Barbara forced a smile in return. She didn't like that the girl stood there, above her. Or the fact that she, herself, had remained in her seat. It seemed like too much of a power shift, and Barbara felt small. It made her question why she'd let a stranger inside her home. Because what else was the girl but that? If Barbara had passed her on the street, that's all she'd be, a stranger, another body she'd brush right by. Until now, she'd waited for the girl to explain why she was there. For awhile it seemed like she would, that it was only right to lay out the facts. *Uncle Leon kicked me out,* she'd say. Or *I just need someone to talk to*. Or...she could question it all day and get no closer to an answer. Earlier, as the girl poured her cereal, Barbara had heard her say something like, "If you got other things to do, you don't have to sit here." Barbara lied and told her she didn't. As far as she knew, the girl was hoping she'd leave. That once Barbara gave her a little space, she'd do any number of things—look for money, or take the car, or steal some of her clothes. She didn't know. How could she? And yet she couldn't help but feel ashamed for thinking all that. The girl looked down at her hands and Barbara could still see it in her face: the innocence, the sadness, the six year old who'd tugged against her legs. Either the girl was a stranger or someone Barbara knew better than anyone else, the only person who'd felt comfortable enough to reveal her fears, her beliefs, who'd told her what she had hoped to become. And maybe this still was her, that same little girl, now standing in the kitchen.

Barbara cleared her throat, but the girl spoke first.

"If you wanna know the truth," she said. "I'm here because of my uncle."

"Excuse me?"

"I found you 'cause of him."

Barbara looked her up and down. She wondered if she'd missed something before, a mark on the girl's arms, or bruise, but she stopped. She'd rather hear the girl tell her than to see it for herself. Finley followed her eyes and seemed to understand.

"It's not like that," she said. "He's not that type of person."

"OK."

"I didn't get kicked out, either. I can go back if I want."

"Then what are you doing here?"

The girl shook her head and looked out the bay window. "My uncle's scared I haven't been able to do anything yet. I'm nineteen and well—he wants me to try and make it."

"Make it how?"

"On my own, I guess. The funny thing is, I've snuck away before. He knows I'm not happy."

"He told you to leave?"

The girl shrugged. "Not exactly. He gave me a choice. Said I can either stick around or see what else is out there. He even helped me pack."

"But how'd you find me?"

"He knows someone who lives here—William or something. They talked about you once. How you were getting by pretty nicely."

"William told him that?"

"Said he's never seen a woman do so well for herself. Not on her own anyway." The girl shrugged. "I think he meant it as a compliment."

Barbara waited for her to go on, but the girl looked around the kitchen and said something like, "You got a nice place." Barbara looked, too. Beside the kitchen was the entrance and to the right of that, the living room. At the back of the house were two bedrooms. Barbara's parents had helped her buy it, even paid the mortgage for the first two years. To them, it was the perfect size to start a family. Not too big, not too small. The master bedroom could fit two people and the guest room was the right size for a crib or bunk bed, if need be. Barbara had told them about her boyfriend, how the two of them had been together for years, without mentioning the fact that he was married or had a son or that he'd never move his clothes into the bureaus they'd bought her, other than a change of underwear for the rare occasions he spent the night. It could have been why she was drawn to Pat in the first place, simply because there was no pressure to be anything more than what they already were. She had no interest in starting a family. When she'd tried to tell her parents, they didn't understand, especially considering what she used to do: "You were a nanny," they'd said. "Don't you remember—you loved that girl." And even if they were right, it didn't mean she'd wanted Finley to be her daughter. In fact, it was Leon who'd made her doubt wanting kids in the first place, the way he

came home, exhausted after a long day's work, his hair matted down with sweat. He'd told Barbara he was doing it all for her, the girl—"But what's the point, she barely even pays attention to me." Now and then he'd talk about his hope for the place, how someday Finley would take over the business he was starting, give her a nice start to life. In a way, Leon treated Finley the way Barbara had, confusing his love for her with money, tangling the two together—and it was then that Barbara remembered what Uncle Leon had done for work.

"Shit," she said. "Your uncle lost his business, didn't he?"

"A few months ago."

"That's right," she said. "I read about it." Or someone had mentioned it to her—how Leon was known for the best ice cream around. The Jumping Cow or Leaping Cow, whatever it was called. Barbara had never gone herself. And as much as she liked to think that Leon had fired her because the girl loved her too much, the truth was, he probably hadn't been able to afford her. She knew what the business cost him. Maybe not the specifics, but he'd say things like: "A thousand here, a thousand there, Jesus, when the hell do I get it back?"

The girl adjusted one of her shirt sleeves and looked out onto the gardens. Barbara considered asking her what else William had said. Truth was, Barbara was flattered. Not only by what the girl had said but that she was there, that after all these years, she'd come to find her. As if she was someone to trust. But even in Barbara's own neighborhood, no one knew that her parents had bought her the house. In fact, Barbara

had told them the opposite: Took me years to save up my money, but here I am, she'd said. It wasn't like she enjoyed lying—but really, how else could she fit in when the others were all self-made? For instance, William had earned his money in the nineties, working for a computer company. And until last year, Ray taught math at a local college. Jim and Mark had been friends since high school and sold their landscaping business the day Mark turned sixty-five. If Barbara had admitted her parents bought the place, what would they think of her then? She was the youngest person by twenty years, the only one who lived alone. When they handed her money for flowers, she'd shoot them a look as if to say: *OK, but only if it makes you feel better*, and laugh, tucking the bills inside her pocket as if it was nothing more than a kind gesture. Everyone seemed to buy her story. She'd even convinced them she owned part of The Mandarin Tang, where she worked. The owner came in so infrequently, that the truth would never get out; in other words, that she was the manager of a dead end restaurant that probably wouldn't see another year before it had to close its doors. Occasionally, when she opened up to Pat, she'd say how no one really knew who she was, not her parents, not her neighbors, not even him, and all he'd say in return is: "Everyone's like that." Maybe he was right. And in a way, she'd come to believe that if people like William and this girl wanted to think she was successful, then that's exactly who she'd be.

"I can help you, you know."

"Really?" said the girl.

Barbara nodded. "You know the Mandarin Tang?"

"I've heard of it."

"Well, I work there. I can get you a job."

"You can?"

"Of course."

"I mean, if it's not too inconvenient."

Barbara laughed. "We'll just sign a few papers. You can start today."

"I'd love to," she said, and Barbara reached for her car keys.

"Then why don't we get you a uniform."

The girl agreed and they stepped outside. Up the street, Ray sat on his porch. He waved and leaned forward, yelled something to them. The girl looked at the gardens. Now and then, Barbara would step back and admire them. Sometimes it surprised her how big they were. Her lawn stretched around the side of her house and then back, into the woods. And from the front of her house to the curb, there must have been fifty yards of open space to grow whatever it was she wanted. Her parents had said how nice it would be to have that room for a child. But each time they came, the garden got bigger and bigger, until hardly any of the grass remained. Now, as she stood beside the girl, she wondered why not cover it all?

At the same time, Ray came up the driveway.

He greeted them and smiled. His teeth were little and off-white, and he tucked his flannel shirt into a pair of jeans. It must have been eighty degrees.

Barbara introduced the girl and the girl extended her hand.

“My God,” he said. “Are you two related?”

The girl told him no.

Ray stepped back and took a moment to look them over. “Are you sure?”

“You know I don’t have kids,” said Barbara.

“I know,” he said. “I was thinking like—a niece. I don’t know.”

The girl shook her head.

“Anyway,” said Barbara. “Look for me this afternoon.”

“I’ll be waiting,” he said, and turned back up the street toward home.

Barbara unlocked the car doors and they started to drive.

After a moment, the girl asked if she visited him often.

“Only on Saturdays,” Barbara said. “I bring him flowers.”

“That’s nice.”

“He’s not the only one, though. I bring everyone flowers.”

The girl nodded.

“The men like to sit outside and talk. It’s nice for them, I think.”

“Are they married?”

“They are.”

“Do you like their wives?”

Barbara shrugged. “Actually, I don’t know them too well.”

“Really?”

“Normally they stay inside. I’m not sure why.”

The girl looked at her for a moment, and said, “Hmm,” but nothing more, until they pulled into the shopping center. Barbara parked beside The Mandarin Tang. At night, the sign lit up both words: “Mandarin Tang” in neon lights. She described it that way to the girl. “It looks better at night,” she said. “I mean, it’s mostly a dinner place, anyway.” In the daylight, it was tan and had long white streaks running from the roof, as if the rain had washed some of the paint away. The building was shaped like a box and the walls were made of a rough, uneven material, with little bumps along the surface. Barbara led her inside and turned on all the lights.

“Here it is,” she said.

The girl looked up at the ceiling, then down, toward the aquarium. Someone would have to clean it soon. The tables were all neatly set, each one made of a dark brown wood and the walls were lined with paper, a red and white design that wrapped around the kitchen doors. If anything, the place looked good. The girl seemed to think so. She ran her hands on one of the table tops and counted how many there were.

“You could fit a lot of people in here,” she said.

“A little under a hundred.”

“Really?”

“Just about.”

The girl smiled. “That’s a lot of tips.”

Barbara nodded. A part of her wanted to tell the truth; the truth: that the place hadn’t filled for months. That even on Fridays and Saturdays, she’d sit by the entrance

and see no more than a dozen cars scattered throughout the parking lot. Maybe she didn't have to know. Maybe, instead, all Barbara had to do was let the girl imagine it on her own: a hundred smiling faces ordering a hundred expensive meals. At times, when Barbara had babysat her, the girl claimed to be a ballerina, an astronaut, an alligator wrestler, and Barbara would simply sit back and watch as the girl danced or flew or took a pillow off the couch and wrestled it to the ground. It made sense back then. If the girl wanted to pretend, she could, she was encouraged—"A ballerina, huh, then let me see you get up on your toes"—and she'd spin.

If only it were still that easy to believe. The girl had said, "Hmm," when Barbara mentioned the wives, but it was Barbara's own parents who had put the doubts in her mind first. "Your boyfriend is a married man," they'd told her, the last time they visited. "We've heard." And added that not a single woman had stepped outside when she brought them flowers or said hello, or said—well, anything.

"And maybe," they had told her. "What you're doing isn't right."

The girl went back to the kitchen and Barbara stood by the entrance. A handful of people walked through the parking lot. Now and then she'd see someone she recognized. On Sundays, Pat's son would run by and keep going. She still hadn't said hello. And yet, she knew exactly when he'd pass, the same time each week: three o'clock in the afternoon, fifteen minutes after she arrived for her shift. He must have known about her. It could have been why he ran past her in the first place. Almost like he wanted to talk. Maybe one day she would.

The girl came out from the back and smiled.

“I think I’m gonna like it here,” she said, and what else could Barbara do but agree?

CHAPTER IV

THE FATHER'S STORY

If I were asked to explain it—which I was, thanks to Barbara—I'd say it all started when my father handed me a hundred dollar bill and then left for some place in Maine, alone, as far as his car could take him, and all that mattered, even then, was the money he'd placed in my hands, not him leaving or my mother's tears or the questions that my sisters asked: Did he even say goodbye? I couldn't remember. All I knew for sure was that he'd driven me to the top of a hill, just above our house, and asked me what made relationships work.

"I know it's a big question," he'd said. "But you can't learn everything from your mom."

It was the first of December, and my father's wool hat covered the top of his eyes.

I don't know, I told him.

"Money," he said and let the word hang between us. "That's why I gotta leave."

"You're leaving?"

"I have to, I ain't winning," which—based on what my mother said—had something to do with his weekly trip to the racetracks. That's all I knew. "She's not happy anymore. You gotta understand that. Not everything comes down to love."

I nodded, as if I'd known it all along.

"Maybe we got married for love," he said. "But it's hard to love someone when you ain't happy. If I were winning, well—"

"You'd be in love."

"That's right," he said. "How'd you know that?"

I shrugged. My father spoke in roundabout statements. Even if I didn't know what the hell he was saying, I understood his formula: Money—Love—Happiness—back to Money again. Next thing up had to be Love.

"Anyway," he said, reaching inside his pocket. "You're gonna be a man someday, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you oughta get a running start." Inside his wallet was a hundred dollar bill, just sitting there, waiting for me to take it. "This is real, you know."

He placed it in my hands and I held the bill up toward the windshield, inspecting both sides. Exhaust rose outside our windows.

"But you gotta keep it safe, OK? As long as you got that much, you'll be happy. You can do anything with a little money."

It seemed a little dramatic, even for me at eleven years old—but there was a kind of power in holding it, something I'd never felt in my father's presence. I asked if it was mine.

"Sure is," he said.

I smiled and folded the bill neatly, tucking it inside my pocket. "Is that all?" I asked.

"That's it. It's all I can spare."

We sat there for a moment, silently, until I looked at him and nodded. I'd seen him do the same with his friends, nodding, like a secret code, man-to-man.

"All right," he said and I opened the side door.

That was it. His car took off slowly, then the engine revved and kicked up dust. I walked myself back down the hill. At home, my mother shouted "Son of a bitch" and cried all night. My sisters cried, too, and asked if I was sure he's gone. "I'm sure," I said but did not mention the money.

—

"Anyway, that's how it started," I said.

Barbara sat in the booth across from me, a couple of PBRs between us. A song played in the restaurant speakers: pop or pop-rock, a woman's voice with a static hum. The place was called the Mandarin Tang, a chinese restaurant that Barbara had managed for six years. It was empty, other than us and two employees: John, the cook, and a new hostess, who'd placed herself by the entrance to watch the empty parking lot. It had been like this for months now. The sound of John's knife going up and down, up and down, as if any moment the crowds might show. They wouldn't. *Don't you know that, John?* A dozen empty chairs in one corner, a dozen in the other, every table still neatly set, waiting, waiting—all the place could do was wait, and hope for some unsuspecting fool

to stumble in. Someone who hadn't read reviews. Or that the place had hardly passed inspection, or how every restaurant between here and the river was known for better food.

"If I'm being honest with you," said Barbara. "I don't really get the moral."

"The moral?"

"Yeah, I mean—what's the point of you telling me this?"

We'd been talking for an hour.

"I mean, so what?" she said. "You understand your father now?"

"More or less."

"OK." She reached for the picture of my son, the wallet-sized one on the table. "So is that supposed to win him back? Through some kind of twisted, perverted—"

"I've only told you the beginning," I said.

She leaned forward and exhaled.

"But you're not gonna leave?"

"No, all I'm trying to do is get him to—"

She put her hand up to stop me. "I get it," she said and paused, then exhaled, louder than the one before. "But what I still can't figure it out is—why do you need her?"

She looked past me at the hostess. I turned, too. The girl flipped through a menu, pretending to be busy. She must have been twenty years old. I'd met her a few days earlier. If the Mandarin Tang were a sinking ship, the girl was already drowning. That's how I thought of her anyway. Barbara disagreed. "She's just fallen on hard times.

Haven't you ever heard that before?" There was more to it than that. The girl was desperate. Why else would she work at a place like this? It didn't make sense for Barbara to hire her. But she felt pity, hearing the girl's story, how her uncle, or guardian, had gone out of business and was broke now, the two of them living in a house they couldn't maintain. The girl needed a break. Working here wasn't it.

"It sounds to me," said Barbara. "That you're trying to be just like him."

I waited for her to clarify.

"Your father, I mean."

—

For as long as I can remember, I'd been told not to be like my dad. Everyone said it. My mother, sisters, even people who'd never met him—"So he just left?" Normally they'd give me the same few lines: "Son of a bitch" or "What a shame" or "It must have been hard for you to move on." But one time, and it could have been a dream for all I know, someone asked if I missed him. The thought had never crossed my mind. "I'm not sure," I said, and they seemed to understand. "It would be natural if you did." "Really?" "Of course." They said, and yet a part of me thought, *You're wrong*—like I'd been programmed, ever since he left, to process nothing but those same few lines.

—

The clock above Barbara's head showed seven pm.

"I just don't know if you're thinking straight," she said, glancing at the beers. "Maybe you should give it a day."

I shook my head.

“Why not?”

“His birthday was two days ago.”

“Who, Roland’s?”

“Yeah and I missed it.”

Her expression didn’t change.

“If you want me to bring her over, I will.”

“Why don’t you?” I said.

She got up and I watched her go.

—

The day I turned eighteen I tracked my father down. It took him a moment to recognize me, the two of us on his front stoop, standing there, him in a button-up shirt and a freshly shaved face. His cleanliness disappointed me. I’d been told that he’d fallen apart since leaving us. His house overlooked a reservoir in Maine, just south of Mount Desert Island. A sign across the road said: “Water Supply/ No Swimming,” with lupines all around it. Two cars sat in his driveway.

He asked if I’d come inside.

We took a seat in the living room, a framed picture of him and a woman on his coffee table, while someone took a shower upstairs. The water turned off, then on again, and my father shuffled his feet. After a moment he glanced up at the ceiling and smiled. “Wanna beer?”

I shook my head, but he got up for the kitchen anyway.

"You like PBR?" he said and tossed me one. A clock hung on the wall behind him, just above his shoulder. I'd seen it as a child. It no longer told the right time. The walls were sparse. No decorations, no paintings, nothing, and yet—it still didn't look the way my mother described, the filth, decay. "He's dying up there without us. Of course he couldn't survive."

"But you're surviving," I said.

He grinned. "What, did your mother tell you otherwise?" A few months earlier, she'd gone up here to see him. I still didn't know why.

"To finalize our divorce," he said.

Now I knew. He leaned forward in his chair and narrowed his eyes, as if anticipating what I'd do next. I wasn't so sure myself. I'd half-expected to find him in a puddle of God-knows-what on his living room floor, the image in my mind: me picking me him up and calling someone, pretending, at least for a moment, that we'd maintained some kind of relationship. Instead, the shower turned off upstairs. "Is this a bad time?" I asked. He seemed to like that I noticed. The place smelled of bath soaps and cigarettes.

"You didn't expect anyone," he began, and I shook my head. "Why don't we get the hell out of here."

We took my car and he said to go up a ways. I drove as he sat beside me, looking blankly out the windows, only the slightest hint of gray in his hair as if time had forgotten he was there—unlike my mother, who'd aged a month every day, a year every month,

who'd, ever since my father left, given up on meeting someone new. "You look good, Dad." He told me, "Thanks," and "Pull in there," pointing to a place with Christmas lights and a couple of phony frosted windows. For a moment, I forgot what month it was, a thermometer in my car reading forty-five degrees, until my father said, "The lazy bastards leave that shit up all year, what the hell is it, May?" and got out, stepped inside. It was dark except for the Christmas lights. A man stood behind the bar with a rag draped over his shoulder while three women huddled together, drinking something light, and a couple of guys in back pressed their shoulders up against the wall.

Finally my father asked how old I was.

"Eighteen," I said.

He looked at me with one eye closed, as if to calculate it himself and raised his fingers, two of them at the man with the rag, whose name was Joe, and we took our seats. Joe handed us two PBRs. My father sipped half of his down, whispered ahh longer than the sip itself, and then, leaning in toward me, whispered something in my ear.

"What?"

"I've been winning again. Big time," he said, finishing his beer. "Been winning ever since I left."

Joe passed him another and this time my father sipped it slower.

"Ain't that right, Joe?"

"Seems to be."

"You know," my father said. "Your mother stopped letting me go. To the tracks, I mean. She ever tell you that?" He scowled while shaking his head. "Blamed me for not having money, but wouldn't let me go. That's the reason, you know. That's why—" and stopped himself, looked at the wall of liquor, a glimmer of light in his eyes as if coming to a realization. "That's why you're here, isn't it?"

I shook my head, watching his big dead eyes.

"Yeah, that's why you tracked me down. For money."

"For money?"

"Yeah, your mother said I was winning, didn't she?"

"Mom said you were broke."

"Broke?"

"Dead broke, actually. Said you were ready to die."

"Is that true?"

"The way she was talking, I expected you to be lying there." I didn't have to go on but I did. "You know what else she said?" He waited for me to answer. "The best thing that ever happened to me was when you left."

"To you?"

"To me."

He wrinkled his brow and put a hand on the bar. For a moment, I thought he'd swing it. A part of me hoped he would.

"Said I would have ended up just like you, if you stayed." He clenched his fist, as if strangling the germs inside. "Said that sometimes—" and I considered what else I felt, whether or not she'd actually said it. "That sometimes it's better when a father leaves."

I knew to stop talking, the way he looked at me: a million thoughts running through his brain and a million in mine. I never knew what he'd do when I was a kid, and I didn't know now. Especially not now. I figured he'd throw something. The empty PBR or the car keys I'd left on the bar. But more than that, I thought he'd leave, tell me, *I'll walk home from here*, and that would be it, again, the last time we'd see each other, or hear a word, until one of us caved. That's all this was: me caving. I hoped he'd punch me. I wanted to punch him back. Right in the face, where my mother said, *Son of bitch lost all his teeth*. But there they were, staring back at me, no longer white, no longer clean, but at least in the same place, oh, how I wanted to swing my fist and knock one of them out to prove my mother right, then wait for him to apologize. I figured he would if I did. That he'd understand: it was because he left that I did it. That it might as well have been his own fist against his chin. In fact, I thought he wanted me to. *Hit me*, he said. And just as I decided do it, of shoving every ounce of energy into the side of his goddamned face, he turned, inspired, I guess, by one of his other million thoughts, and rather than leave or yell or throw something across the room, he said to one of the women instead, "So Debbie, I ever tell you I got a son?"

—

To this day, my mother asks if I know what it means to love someone. She says my sisters do. If I ask her why, she'll tell me, "'Cause they didn't go tracking down your father."

And then she'll list the people I've never loved.

"Your wife," she begins. "'Cause you're with Barbara. And Barbara 'cause you're ashamed of her. And you don't love me or your sisters, 'cause you don't ever come to see us. And your co-workers, 'cause I hear how you complain. The only person that comes close is Roland. But you know why you don't love him?" And then she pauses, to see if I'm still listening. "'Cause everything you believe about it is artificial. You got an artificial sense of love, Pat. The sad thing is," and she pauses again, this time to catch her breath. "I don't think you're gonna change. You could listen to me all day, but that doesn't mean you understand. If you loved him, you'd know how to be a father. You wouldn't be asking yourself. That's the question you're asking, isn't it? What it means to be a dad. I'm sorry it had to be like this—but he's your son, you know? What the hell do you think he'll remember?"

—

Barbara and the girl spoke for a moment, then the girl stepped over. She stood just beside the booth and held one of her wrists. "Is there something I can do for you?" she said. It was perfect, the way she smiled. Like she meant it. Like she was happy. If only she knew I saw right through her. Barbara went back to the kitchen, saying she'd check on John.

"You wanna sit?"

The girl glanced at the entrance, then thought better of it. "I guess for a moment," she said. Her hair hung down, just over one shoulder, and the top of her shirt remained unbuttoned, the way Barbara wore hers, enough to give a hint. She was pretty, even prettier up close. A little makeup on her cheeks and lips, a blemish at the base of her chin that she'd tried to cover up.

"So," I said, not entirely sure how to begin. "Do you like it here?"

She glanced at one of the tables.

"It's not really what I imagined."

"What did you imagine?"

"People."

"Hmm," I said. "People might help."

"Has it always been this empty?"

I shook my head. "Some nights you'd have to fight for seats."

"Really?"

"Fridays, Saturdays, you could hardly even move. Back there," I said. "By the lobby, people would sit on top of each other. Like turtles." She laughed at that. "On cold nights, everyone huddled in here together, strangers. Just waiting for a table to clear." I looked around, too. "It's almost hard to picture."

"What happened?"

I shrugged. "People wanted something new, I guess."

She glanced down at her hands.

"Truth is," she began. "I don't know what I'm doing here."

"No?"

"I almost thought it was a joke. My first night—like Barbara had left the Closed sign on or something."

I waited for her to go on.

"Do you know how old I am?"

"Twenty?"

She nodded.

"And you know what I've done? I mean, in those twenty years?"

"Worked for your uncle," I said.

"Scooped ice cream for him. My whole life. Then he lost it, like that." She snapped her fingers. "For a second, I thought it might be good, you know? Like we could start something new. Or at least I could, whether or not he did. But you know what happened instead? He stopped giving a damn." She shook her head. "And now I'm here."

"Because of money," I said.

"Because of—" She searched the booth for another word. "I don't know, maybe."

"A lot of people are scared to admit that," I said. "Like it shouldn't interfere."

At the same time Barbara swung open the kitchen doors, two beers in hand, with John right behind her. He told her, "No," and repeated it. "No, no, no," trying to stop her, just as she got to the booth.

Barbara set the beers down and told him to relax.

"Who's gonna pay for those?" he said.

"That's not your problem."

"Then whose is it?"

"Mine. You're just the cook."

John paused.

"Just the cook?"

"I didn't mean it like that—you're the cook, John."

He smiled and looked around.

"Oh, I'm the cook," he said. "That's better. And who am I cooking for?" No one answered. "Huh?" Barbara bit her lower lip. "If I'm just the cook, then I guess I'm not needed," and on his way to the exit, whispered, "Enjoy the beers, you son of a bitch."

—

The Christmas lights hung loosely behind Joe, the bartender, while my father leaned in to say, "So that's what she called me, a son of a bitch?"

"All night," I said.

"I figured it'd be worse."

I shrugged.

The woman named Debbie sat beside him. She was twenty-eight years old and wore too much perfume. It didn't matter. She'd laughed at everything I said.

"I guess you had to grow up fast," she told me.

"I guess."

"I mean, you were the man of your house. At eleven years old."

My father cleared his throat, probably louder than he had to.

I took another sip and set the bottle down. There were thirteen others, scattered across the bar. My father asked if I'd had a drink before. "Twice," I said. "Even once with Mom." There was something about the confidence in his eyes. I couldn't let him take the credit. Joe handed me another. Half of the bottles were mine, or at least that's how it seemed. Debbie had ordered two glasses herself, one of them finished, one filled with gin. Each time she took a sip, she looked at me and smiled, and I couldn't help but think she was mine, if that's what I decided to make her.

After a moment, my father shook his head and laughed, as if someone had told a joke from inside his head.

"You know, you're wrong about that."

Neither of us answered him. He looked out, across the bar.

"I mean, about him being a man."

Joe wiped his hands on a rag, then stepped away.

"You know how I know? If Pat were a man, he wouldn't have come here tonight."

I wasn't sure what to say. The way he smiled, I figured he was joking.

"What do you mean?"

His eyes had become blurry and distant. He took another sip of beer, and turned to me and grinned. "If you didn't come here for money," he began. "What did you hope to accomplish?"

I shook my head.

"The thing is, my father ran away, too. But you don't see me looking for him. You know why? 'Cause I moved on."

Debbie grabbed him by the arm. "What are you talking about, James?"

He pulled himself away. "You know, your mother told me some things. When she was up here. Said she wanted to talk about you."

I considered what she might have said.

"But you probably already know, don't you?"

I shook my head. I didn't think he'd go on.

"No, I bet you do," he said. "Think about it." He waited a moment, then smiled again. "You've never had a woman, Pat."

Debbie leaned in closer.

"Sure, I have."

"No, you tell her you have. But she followed you once." He looked like he was ready to laugh. "You've been telling her you got a girlfriend. But she knows you don't."

I could hardly even open my mouth.

"The funny thing is, she doesn't know why you've been making it up. But I do." He raised a finger for one more beer. Joe took his time getting it. "It's 'cause you want her to think you're in love." He nodded, but not the way I'd remembered, man-to-man.

"That doesn't make any sense."

"No, it does." Joe passed him a beer. "'Cause if you found love, then maybe she can, too. Even if it's fake. That's all you've ever needed, right? Why you tracked me down. 'Cause you think it means something that I'm your father. Whether it's real or not." He looked off, just past my shoulder. "You know what I think? You've been scared your whole life. 'Cause you're not sure if anyone around you's ever felt it. Not your mother, not your sisters. You think that none of them have ever felt love and somehow it's your fault."

Debbie tried to shush him. "You're drunk," she said.

"Maybe what you should try and understand," he said. "Is there ain't no way to change it. If they're unhappy, they're unhappy. Hasn't that ever crossed your mind?"

—

Finley couldn't help but cry. She tried to push her way out of the booth, but Barbara sat down beside her, saying shh-shh, that it would best if everyone just—

"Just what?"

"Relaxed."

"That's what you told John," said the girl.

Barbara put an arm around her and looked at me for help. Out of the corner of my eye, a piece of wallpaper fell and a puddle formed in the ceiling—or at least that's what I'd come to expect, the whole place crashing down around us.

"My God," I said. "When did everything get so fucking twisted?"

It was quiet for a moment. Then the girl lifted her head.

"What did you say?"

Barbara shot me a look, her eyes wide, ready to pounce.

"It got twisted," I said. "All of it—you, me, Barbara. John storming out 'cause he's mad. I mean, Christ, how long has he worked here?"

"Four years," said Barbara.

"Four years? He ain't coming back. And now you," I told the girl. "Trying to start over. Picking up the pieces, or whatever Barbara calls it. You know what you'll be doing instead? Looking for a job. In a month, maybe two. Look at this place. Here I am, spending every night in between these walls. For what? 'Cause I'm scared to go home? It's all just gonna leave. Don't you understand?"

Barbara cleared her throat.

"So," she said. "Is this all part of your plan?"

"My plan?"

"Yeah," said Barbara. "Make her feel vulnerable—then what? I'm waiting."

The girl looked back and forth between us.

"I'm just trying to talk," I said.

"What's going on?"

"What's going on?" said Barbara. "Pat's got a question for you, that's what." The girl focused on me. "'Cause of something his father said years ago. Now that's what I'd call twisted. I mean, what, did he buy you a girl, too?" I still could picture it—getting up from the bar, as Debbie leaned in toward my father, her hand upon his leg. "Well?" said Barbara.

The girl waited for me to say something.

"Well?" Well...Well...

I guess everything I'd been meaning to say boiled down to just a handful of words. "I want you to fall in love with my son," I told her.

Neither one answered.

"Or pretend to, I don't know—make him happy. I got the money," I said and pulled out a hundred dollar bill.

Barbara smirked.

"What's so funny?"

"Just so you know," she told the girl. "This was all his idea."

I put the bill on the table and the girl watched, waited.

"I had nothing to do with—"

"What do you mean by 'love'?" said the girl, interrupting.

I tried imaging it: Barbara and me in the booth, my son across from us. "I don't know," I began. "I guess I'd bring him here and you'd walk through the doors. Ask to sit, you know?"

She shook her head. "Wouldn't that seem strange?"

"Maybe you'd recognize us. Barbara'll be there." Barbara crossed her arms. "She's an old friend or something. You haven't seen her in years."

The girl looked down at her hands. It was quiet for too long. A part of me wanted to take it back. *Forget I said it* while running out the door—

"So I'd ask to join you?"

"Right."

"And we'd start to talk."

I nodded. "All four of us," I said. "And once you started talking—I don't know. Maybe you'd like him. I mean, genuinely."

"But if I don't?"

"Well, he'd need to believe it. That's the point."

The girl cocked her head like a dog.

"Can I ask you something?" she said.

"Of course."

"Do you think I'm desperate?"

"I just thought—"

"Thought we both are, right? I mean, your son and me. Him for some kind of love. Me for money."

I wasn't sure what to tell her.

"Is that why you think it'll work?" She paused but didn't let me answer, like she could finish the conversation herself. "You have to know something," she said. "If I take your money, it's not 'cause I'm desperate." She tapped her fingers on the bills. "It's 'cause I'm getting by, just like you."

She glanced at Barbara but Barbara said nothing.

"So don't tell me there's some kind of difference. What we're doing is the same damn thing."

I nodded.

"I mean, you get that, right?"

"Of course."

She waited a moment and looked me over, as if to determine whether I meant it.

"OK," she said. "But I'm gonna need more than that."

I took two twenties out of my wallet and added them to the table. "That's it," I said.

"At least a few more hundreds. If you really want him to believe."

"That seems high."

The girl shrugged.

"I'd have to bring it to you another time."

"That's OK." She looked around the room and wiped the cheeks. "So I guess that's it."

"I guess."

The girl reached out toward the money. "If you wanna know the truth," she said, stuffing it inside her pocket. "It seems like a fucked-up thing for a father to do," and then shrugged. "But I don't care to hear your story."

—

Before my mother and I finish talking on the phone, she tells me, "I guess that's the curse of being a son." But she doesn't clarify or say anything more—and then we go our separate ways. What I've come to think she means is this: when I left the bar that night in May, I didn't hate my father. Even as Debbie leaned in to kiss him. Or when he watched me go with deadened eyes. In a way, how could it be anything but a curse? To maintain some shred of doubt or hope, for years, that things might change. To believe that, deep inside, he still wishes me the best. A part of me hopes it's true, that all sons feel this way about their fathers—and if it is, then Roland bears it, too. That somehow he assumes, without me having to say it, that I love him, and he loves me back. My mother doesn't mean it as a good thing. But it's the one thing she says that provides any kind of comfort. All I can do is hope she's right, that it's the curse we all share as sons; and that one day we might realize why we always had a doubt.

CHAPTER V

THE CHINESE RESTAURANT

Roland White was at The Mandarin Tang with his father, and they were the only customers there. It was a Tuesday night, just past eight-thirty. Roland had turned seventeen a couple weeks ago, and his father was a cheater. He'd known his father was a cheater for four years now, ever since his mother said, "I know what you're doing at The Mandarin Tang with Barbara." Barbara was the hostess, in her mid-thirties. Roland's father was somewhere between fifty and fifty-five, but Roland wasn't sure. His parents didn't discuss their ages or their salaries, or if they'd ever had a love life before each other—and that made it even funnier, the fact that they maintained certain mysteries, and yet Roland knew the worst parts about each.

The worst part about his mother was that she stopped seeing her parents five years before they died. They'd gotten into one big fight, when his mother's mother said, "Maybe you should get tested for bipolar disorder." And his mother said, "I'm a nurse, I think I know what I do and do not have." And his mother's mother said, "Well..." and neither of them ever spoke again. That was the worst part. The second worst was that his mother's mother was probably right, that his mother would enter one rapid mood swing after the next, sometimes happy, sometimes sad, sometimes just really, really pissed—and even on rare occasions, crying out to God, saying, "You are my savior, amen," for no

reason at all. But Roland didn't care if she was diagnosed or undiagnosed, the fact was she still worked twelve-hour shifts at the hospital and somehow managed to keep the three of them under "the same goddamn roof."

The same goddamn roof was a tiny yellow house in the same neighborhood as The Mandarin Tang. The Mandarin Tang was a part of a shopping center at the end of Oak Street, which happened to be the same name as the street they'd lived on before. That was supposed to be a good omen, according to his father, because it meant stability. They'd been living on the new Oak Street for ten years, and Roland could still picture the old one, how it was just as shitty and had the same number of potholes: at least a hundred, if not more.

Now it was eight-thirty-six. Barbara sat in their booth, beside Roland, and smelled like Dubble Bubble bubble gum. "I just can't believe I've never met you," she said. "Sometimes I see you running past these windows. You're pretty fast, are you on the team?"

"Not on the track team," said Roland. "But I play basketball."

"Oh, so you're on the basketball team?"

"No, but I play," he said, and Barbara laughed.

She had a nice laugh. And she smelled good, even though Roland didn't care for Dubble Bubble. She wore glasses, the kind with pointed edges that framed her face like a teacher's face, like a smart person's face. But she probably wasn't smart. She'd been

working at this place for at least four years now, and the closer Roland looked at the lines around her eyes, the more he figured she was thirty-eight, maybe even forty.

So you and my dad are having a fling? he said. But then he realized he hadn't said it at all, that he was just looking her in the eyes with his mouth sewn shut, wondering what she looked like naked. Probably pretty good. He kind of liked older women, the way they wore shirts that showed the top of their breasts. And he always had better luck with the older girls than the ones his age because older women laughed at what he said. Girls his age didn't give a damn what he said. So in five to ten years, he'd be a real ladies-man. It would be the perfect age: twenty-one to twenty-six, available to just about any woman he wanted. And if he had one real dream in life, that was it, to look at a girl and know he could have her.

But if his mother chose his dream, it would be to grow up, find a wife, and treat that wife right. She'd told him many times, "I can see you getting married in college, you know. Because you're the settling-down type, so don't kid yourself. It's a good thing, too, because your father wasn't, and look how he turned out."

Roland didn't know why his parents were still together, but it didn't matter. He knew a lot of successful people who didn't get along with their parents or whose parents never got along with each other. It didn't hurt anyone to have messed up parents. Or at least it didn't hurt the creative types. And Roland considered himself just that, looking around at the ugly restaurant walls and picturing the whole thing upside down, their booth against the ceiling, the little eel aquarium draining out onto the floor, and his father

desperately trying to defy gravity by maintaining his position in the booth. He was capable of seeing these things, and then flipping it all upright, like he could go back and forth between two worlds, the one he controlled and the one he didn't, which was the one with his feet on the floor and his father sitting across from him.

He hadn't wanted to eat at The Mandarin Tang, but his father figured he was old enough to finally meet Barbara. He'd seen her before on his runs past the place, but he pictured her as a little Chinese woman with a bowl cut, because his mother would say, "So you feel like eating Chinese tonight, huh Pat?" And it was obvious by the tone in her voice, that she meant it as an innuendo.

But what kind of father said to his son, "I'd like to introduce you to a woman I enjoy more than your mother?" Roland looked at his dad like he'd never seen him before: the guy had two pierced ears with golden studs, which seemed strange for a person his age, and a little goatee, the trashy kind, the kind that usually went with a wife-beater and a can of Bud Light. Also, his eyes were bright blue and his skin was smooth, as if he moisturized it twice a day—and if you just focused on certain features, he was a fairly handsome fifty to fifty-five year old man. He had tattoos, too, which Roland could picture even though they were covered by a shirt. On his left shoulder was a cross, despite his lack of religious beliefs and the fact that he only said "Jesus" when he got mad.

"Anyway," said his father. "I figured we'd have some drinks."

"What kind of drinks?" said Barbara.

"Well," his father said. "Roland just turned seventeen, and we haven't celebrated yet."

"So, you're talking beers."

"I'm talking beers," said his father. "And nice beers, too, not those shitty ones."

Barbara glanced at Roland.

"You ain't a cop, right?" she said, and then laughed like it was the funniest thing she'd ever heard. Then she got up to the kitchen.

His father leaned in, across the table. "This is the only place we could celebrate," he said. "I mean with drinks."

"I don't want a drink," said Roland.

"Well, your first drink's on me, OK?"

"But I told you—"

"It don't matter," said his father and waved his hands, like he was turning money away. "This chick always hooks me up," he said. "Probably gonna get these drinks for free." And he looked Roland in the eyes, like this was something he should aspire to.

If Roland thought about it, his parents were still together because they no longer gave a damn. And they no longer gave a damn for a long time now, even before Barbara or anyone else who might have come first. But it wasn't right to feel that way. A part of him would have preferred if they'd gotten divorced. In fact, a divorce might even make him proud. If his mom divorced his dad, he could tell her, "Well, we always knew Pops was a cheater, didn't we?" And if his dad was the one to do it, he'd say, "Ma sure got

crazy, huh?" But who was he kidding, his parents weren't getting divorced. They'd have to admit their mistakes first, and that just wasn't something they did.

Roland would treat women right. That's what he decided. Life was too short to not give a damn. If he ever stopped loving his wife, that's what he'd tell her, "I don't love you anymore." And they'd get divorced like all the sane couples who fell out of love.

Barbara came back with their drinks and put them on the table. There were three of them, in tall icy glasses. The beer was dark, and she said, "It's Samuel Adams, honey."

His father lifted his glass and told them, "Cheers," but Roland hardly noticed. He was thinking about what the world would look like without his dad. It might not be such a bad place—but it wouldn't make him happy either, looking across the booth and seeing no one there. The restaurant would be lonely without him. And those little gold earrings, shining off the lights. They'd be missing, too.

"Loosen up," said his father, and Roland took a sip.

"So you like it?" said Barbara.

"Sure," said Roland and wiped his mouth. "But I've drank before."

"When?" said his father.

"On my birthday."

"Where was I?"

"You were out."

"You drank my liquor?"

"Some of your whiskey."

His father made a face.

"I thought this'd be your first drink."

"No, I took two shots of your whiskey and one of your beers." Then Roland turned to Barbara. "I didn't like his beer much, but this is good."

"It's your dad's favorite," said Barbara. "Isn't it, Pat?"

"Yeah," said his father and looked at Roland with the same displeased face, his smooth skin like a forty year old's.

"Well," said Barbara. She looked uncomfortable and checked the clock. "Nice thing about drinking here is you can always walk home."

His father nodded and took a big gulp. Then the front door opened. It sounded like a pan hit the floor. The eel tank bubbled in the corner, and Roland wondered if the eel was happy. He hoped to God it wasn't. If an eel could live in a tank and still be happy, then what would Roland know about happiness? Not a damn thing. It wouldn't make sense for the eel to feel that way, living in a world that's just twice its size. If that eel was happy, then the universe might as well flip itself inside out. No, that eel wasn't happy, and that was a good thing, too. Sitting there in its tank, keeping the whole world in order.

"You ever eat one of those things?" said Roland, but Barbara was already standing, going toward the door, talking in the distance.

"I was wondering when you'd get here."

She disappeared for a second, then came back with a customer. The customer was a female, maybe nineteen years old. She kind of looked familiar and had a nice body. Her shirt hung low. You could see the top of her breasts. She had long brown hair, almost too long, going halfway down her back, and her cheeks were a little bumpy. Roland liked the way she dressed.

"The bathroom's back there," said Barbara, and the girl went back.

His father smiled like he knew something.

"What do you know?" said Roland.

"That's a pretty girl, is all."

So you like the young ones, too? said Roland, but he hadn't opened his mouth.

Barbara then sat beside his father. The girl came out of the bathroom, smelling like too much perfume. His father's beer was almost empty, and he told Roland to keep up, that it was time to drink like a real man, and a real man drinks fast.

The girl came up to the table and held her arms, swaying a little.

Barbara told her to take a seat. The girl looked Roland in the eyes, like she was asking his permission.

"Do I know you?" he said.

"No," said the girl. "But I don't know you either."

"Take a seat," Barbara repeated. "I'll go get another round. You want one, too?" She was talking to the girl.

The girl nodded, and Roland said, "Are you a friend of Barbara's or something?"

"I used to work here." And then the girl sat down without his permission. Roland looked past her at the eel tank. The eel was watching them. It was a smart eel, sitting there, making its judgments.

Roland still had half of his beer. His father didn't like that. "You gotta be a man," he said, but that was a stupid thing to say because Barbara had finished hers before anyone—and if his father considered Barbara a woman, then what the hell did beer have to do it? Roland pushed his glass away and wondered if his mother would approve, not of the beer, but of this moment. He wished she would walk in right now, in one of her manic moods, the ones when she yelled, "Hallelujah, Jesus," and see them sitting there, his father trying to maintain his position in the booth, squirming, like they were hanging upside down. He liked to watch him fidget. It proved his dad was human.

The girl scanned Roland's face like she was lost.

In a way, Roland had already seen too much of her: the freckles around her nose and the eyeliner that smudged. Her neck was thin and she breathed from her mouth, opening her lips just wide enough. A part of him wanted to reach out and kiss her, this stranger, this real person—because that's what she was, sitting in the world he didn't control: a real person. It would be a short kiss, a non-sexual kiss, just to see what it was like, to show her, I'm real, too. Her lips were kind of chapped, even beneath the makeup —not that she wore that much, just the same as any girl, and he felt like telling her to finish his beer.

"So," the girl said. "Do you wanna wait a little bit? Or should we go now?"

“Wait for what?” said Roland.

“I mean,” she said. “Are you ready now? Or should we drink a little first?”

“Ready for what?”

His father showed the girl his evil eyes.

“I mean,” she said. Then it got quiet.

And it stayed quiet for a moment or two, until his father couldn’t hold back any longer.

“God damn it,” he said.

Barbara came over with four drinks in her hands.

So his father said it again, louder this time. “Jesus Christ, God damn it.”

“Is everything all right?” said Barbara.

“No.”

“What happened?”

“You were just supposed to talk,” said his father, looking at the girl. “He doesn’t know about this.”

Roland cocked his head like a dog. “Are you here for me?” he asked.

“That’s what I’m here for,” said the girl. “I’m here for you.”

“But you weren’t supposed to tell him,” said Barbara.

His father raised his hands in disbelief.

“You were just supposed to talk,” he said. “Haven’t you done this before?”

The girl shook her head. “Never done a thing like this.”

"You told me you had," said Barbara.

"Truth is, I haven't."

His father crossed his arms and leaned back. He looked upset. But not upset in the way that he would slam his fists or chug his beer or storm out through the doors. He just leaned back with his arms against his body, shaking his head. That's all he ever did, shake his head in disapproval. He hadn't ever hit Roland. His mother said he had, that he was physically abusive, going for drinks with his mistress and coming back drunk. Of course he'd hit Roland, she said. But he hadn't. And Roland doubted if he'd ever hit her, either. It wasn't something he'd do, fight against his family.

It almost made more sense to think that his parents loved each other. A part of him thought they did. That the three of them stayed under the same goddamn roof for a reason. But all he wanted was the truth. He could never ask his parents if they loved each other because they'd both say no. If only he knew exactly what his parents wanted, if they'd dreamt of something more, or whether they'd thought of forgiving each other—and maybe they were close to saying it, that they'd both been ready to move on and ignore their worst parts, but neither of them had budged. For a moment, he wanted to tell the eel to look away, that it was seeing too much of his family, that the longer it watched, the more capable it became of judging them, and the last thing Roland wanted was to be mocked for something his father did not understand. There were times when Roland doubted if anyone in the world could be more clueless, and his answer now was no.

There was no one in the world more clueless than his father, and it didn't matter what anyone said: the man with golden earrings had always been a fool.

But he didn't like that thought. In fact he wanted to take it back. It was too late to take it back. He'd already convinced himself: his dad was somehow beneath him. So he looked at the girl and said, "Excuse me please, I think I'm gonna step outside."

She stood up from the booth, and he pushed his way through the doors. It was warm out and had gotten dark. A part of him expected his father to step out, too, and walk him down Oak Street, back toward home. He could feel it, the thought of them together, he and his father with the street lights on not saying a word just understanding that they'd both made a mistake, that they shouldn't have gone to the Mandarin Tang. Somehow that made sense. That his father would abandon Barbara and act like a dad, if only for one night. He remembered, standing there in the parking lot, that when he had turned eight he stepped out of the shower and saw his parents on the couch, watching TV. He remembered it because he had always taken a shower in the morning—but that morning, since it was his eighth birthday, his parents had said he could wait until night and be dirty all day, if that's what he wanted. So after the shower, his father patted a small space on the couch and told him to sit. Roland sat, and his father grabbed a comb from his pocket and his parents took turns, slicking his hair back or pushing it up like a mohawk, and every time he saw himself in the mirror, he laughed. It was real, and he knew it. At one point his parents had both been real.

But why aren't you anymore? I remember when you were but I bet you don't, do you?

The door behind him opened. The footsteps were soft against the pavement. He knew it wasn't his father—each step, light like a ballerina's. The girl approached him, beneath the street lights. She was wearing pink. He hadn't noticed the color before. It was youthful and sexy, and he knew that she existed in the world he didn't control. She stood a few feet away. Her bottom teeth were chipped. He could see in between her lips, like she'd fallen and hit her jaw. His friends wouldn't say she's hot. They'd say she's got an OK body, but she isn't like the girls in magazines. They were all waiting for girls in magazines and the ones on TV. Roland would take a TV girl any day. And if he had one of the girls from magazines, he'd show her to his dad and to his mom and say, "Look what I got, a girl from the magazines." But this girl just stood there, with blackened stains in the parking lot.

"You look familiar," said Roland.

"That's cause," she said, and he wondered if they might have always been friends. "I went to your high school."

"Do you remember me?"

"No, your dad said so."

"Oh."

"I graduated last year."

"And now you're a prostitute?"

She gave him a dirty look. "I guess you weren't listening," she said. "I've never done this before."

"I bet my dad paid you though."

"He did."

"That sounds like a prostitute."

"Well, it's not," she said. "He was dumb enough to give me money. And I need every cent."

For a moment, Roland wondered if the girl might like him. He could have her: this girl beneath the restaurant signs, who'd never be in magazines. He could have her. But he couldn't ask if she wanted him. It wouldn't make any sense. She was there because she was paid, and the possibility that they might have done something, even without her interest—he wanted to think of something else. It felt too much like not giving a damn. He hoped that if he asked her, she would have said no. That if he'd said, "Well, my dad paid you, so..." she'd give the money back. And yet, he didn't want her to leave. He wanted to show her that he gave a damn, that it would be lonely by himself, standing in the parking lot while his parents weren't home. He saw a couple of parked cars and a McDonald's with those ugly yellow arches, the smell of hamburger grease and chicken lo mein. He wanted to leave, but not by myself—and where would he go? He'd go to New Jersey. He always went to New Jersey. But never with someone else. The bridge was a few miles away. It made him feel like he had control, going to another state, knowing he could escape. He preferred to see the river from the other side. And if he

were to buy a home, it would be just across that bridge, so he could watch the places where he used to live without ever going back.

He checked his watch. It was nine-thirty. He wanted to ask the girl to go with him. But he was afraid she'd get the wrong idea. What would they do once they got there? He just wanted to show her. She probably hadn't seen it the way he had, the river, what it looked like from the other side. The moon was almost full. He imagined it in the water. And maybe she'd understand, that if he explained it to her she'd see the beauty in it all. He believed in beauty. And he believed that he could recognize it no matter what, this girl standing beneath the lights in her hot pink shirt. He wanted to show her what he saw.

"I didn't ask for you," he said.

"I know you didn't."

He wondered how many lives she might have lived. A million. She could have lived a million lives, coming from rich folks or poor folks or somewhere in between. She could have been on her own or was hoping to leave—and if he had to guess, there was something she wanted that she'd never find. But the longer he stood beside her, the more he knew that regardless of all her lives, she was supposed to be there now.

"Will you come with me?" he said.

"OK."

"You will?"

"I got nothing else."

He told her that he could drive, but she laughed and held onto her keys. So they got inside and she started driving, and a mile up the road, he asked for her name.

"Finley," she said.

He rolled the windows down, with bugs flying by, and the warm summer breeze.

"Finley?"

"Yeah, Finley"—and it didn't sound like a name to him, but they kept on driving, with New Jersey just ahead.