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*Quiet Work* is a collection of short stories unified by the way in which characters experience the tectonics of emotion: The hidden turbulence below the surface, the silent collisions of want and need which bring an individual to the point of transformation, whether that change occurs over a span of time, or in a single volcanic upheaval.

QUIET WORK: STORIES

by

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## APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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## WOMEN AND CHILDREN

One day the previous summer, Frankie had followed his dad along the dusty shoulder of the road, the two of them on their way back from somewhere Frankie couldn't remember. What he did remember was holding a thin blade of grass between his thumbs, then blowing, and the high, kazoo-like sound it made. His dad glancing back at him. He remembered breaking into a nervous gallop to catch up, then falling behind again to watch a pair of starlings rise up out of the cornfield and into the sky, one just like the other, a bird flying with its own shadow. He watched them overhead as he picked up his pace, and nearly bumped into his dad, who'd stopped with his hands on his hips to look at the house. It was the only one for miles, standing like a lone domino amid the cornfields. Frankie stood as close to his dad as he could without touching. Close enough to smell grease and the ghost of aftershave. They stood that way together, it seemed for a long time, Frankie trying not to fidget or ask why they weren't going on in to dinner. He thought how funny his dad looked in a soiled blue shirt with his name stitched over the pocket, instead of the crisp shirts he wore at his old job, when he was foreman at the paper mill. Frankie scratched at a mosquito bite. He looked at the broken shards of glass that glinted among the gravel on the shoulder of the road. At the orange underbellies of the clouds. Then he looked at the house, his house, and he felt suddenly full of satisfaction that it was his house. That he was home, and that it was a nice home, and

that other people driving by as they left town must see this house and feel envious of it. It had never occurred to him before—that having something like a nice house was what made a person feel this way. Like a man. He put his hands on his hips and nodded, and felt proud of himself for thinking such thoughts, for knowing what his dad must have been thinking, too.

The next day, Frankie's dad had come home with paint so white Frankie had to squint to look at it in the sunlight. His father repainted everything—siding, porch, trim—then stood on the shoulder of the road again in his paint-splattered shirt and stared at the house. He stood there a long time. Then he shook his head and spat on the ground. Two weeks later, he left, and he hadn't come back.

Frankie was eight then. Now he was nine, it was summer again, and the air conditioning was broken. His mother climbed up onto the kitchen countertop. She hooked her fingertips under the lip at the bottom of the window, and strained to lift it. When she climbed back down, her cheeks were pink and wisps of hair clung to the sides of her face. She smoothed her skirt and glared at the painted-shut window, where a fat fly dragged itself across the glass.

"Your goddamned father," she said.

Frankie pressed his forehead to the window. His bicycle was toppled on its side in the yard, just waiting for someone to trip over it. He'd ridden it into town two days ago and hadn't used it since, but still his mom hadn't said anything about it.

"Mom?"

As if he'd snuck up behind her and shouted *boo*, his mother gave a start, nearly dropping the eggs she carried back from the refrigerator.

"Frankie, would you sit down and get out of my way, please?" she said. "Every time I turn around, I walk into you."

"But when's he going to get here?" He slumped in his chair and traced his finger over the scars in the wood surface of the table.

His mother put the eggs in a pot, then filled the pot with water, then lit the stove and put the eggs on to boil. Each time she passed the window, her reflection appeared in the glass: a pretty ghost passing by and pausing to look in on him. At school, Frankie's class had learned about caterpillars and cocoons, and it seemed to him his mother had done the same sort of magic trick over the winter and spring, first wearing torn jeans and his father's old tee shirts every day, her unwashed hair tied up in a bandanna; until one morning she hadn't gotten out of bed, and stayed in her dark room for several days while Frankie poured his own cereal and walked himself to his bus stop; and then at the end of that week, she'd emerged, looking ready for church even though it wasn't a Sunday, dressed in a blouse and a skirt that swirled prettily when she turned, and her hair curled and even her fingernails painted a pale pink. Frankie couldn't account for the change. But he remembered times before when his mother had been seized by a new excitement, how she'd dress this way and fix her hair, and talk about taking a correspondence course to be a nurse's aide or knitting tea cozies to sell at the flea market, and how his dad would sigh and shake his head then tell her how nice she looked, she ought to get dolled up more often.

She leaned one hip against the sink and took a tube of lipstick from her pocket and drew it across her lips, and suddenly her mouth was a small, red flower. She stood still, with her arms folded, as if waiting for someone to take her picture.

"Mom," Frankie said, and the sound of his voice made her jump again. "What time is it?"

"You've got eyes, Frankie. There's the clock right over the stove."

"But what time is Paul getting here?"

"Same time as usual, I expect." His mother took the pot from the stove. On her way back to the sink, she paused to point the wooden spoon in her hand at Frankie. "I don't want you getting in his way today, understand? He's got plenty to do without you running after him."

"He said I could help," Frankie told her. "I'm helping fix the Road Runner. Paul said maybe he'll get the timing gear today, and then we can put it in."

His mother drained the water from the hardboiled eggs, then stood at the counter and rolled them so their shells cracked under the palm of her hand. She let Frankie roll a pair of eggs, too. He peeled the shells away and lined the pieces on the table, then arranged them, made a stick figure, then made a second smaller one. He wished that Paul would come out to the house every day and not just on the days his mother needed something done. But, Paul had explained, Frankie's mother wasn't the only lady he worked for, and it was true Frankie had seen Paul in town mowing Mrs. Hanneken's lawn. Paul had seen Frankie, too, and had lifted two fingers in a little salute, and, waving back, Frankie hoped that someone on the street had seen this, how he was friends with

Paul, who was nineteen, and could fix cars and mend fences and reshingle roofs, and who always talked to Frankie like they were just the same.

His mother moved about the kitchen, swept the pieces of eggshell from the table into her hand. She fetched the box fan from the living room and turned it on and the steady hum of it made Frankie think of an engine revving. It was the Plymouth Road Runner, no longer corralled in the barn like a forgotten horse, with its hood up and greasy tools scattered all around. It was parked behind the house, shiny in the sun, with Paul in the front seat, his hand on the steering wheel, about to the sound the horn so Frankie would know it was time to go.

Outside, the gravel in the driveway crackled under the tires of a rusted blue pickup that drove past the kitchen window then pulled around behind the house. Frankie pushed his chair back and ran out onto the porch.

Paul getting out of the truck was like a pocketknife unfolding itself. His long arms dropped to his sides and his broad hands dug into his pockets for his lighter and a crumpled pack of Marlboros. He swung the door shut and admired himself in the window as he tucked a cigarette between his lips. He passed a hand through his hair, which was thick and wavy and uncombed. Every movement was unhurried, like he knew everything waited on him, and would wait for him.

He nodded at Frankie and said, "Look here what I got."

"The timing gear?" Frankie took the cardboard box Paul handed him and hefted it. It was satisfyingly heavy. The Road Runner they were fixing up was old—it had been Frankie's dad's first car—and Paul had to special-order most of the parts from a company

in Chicago. "You think this'll fix it?" Frankie said. "Her, I mean?" Paul had taught him that cars were always *her*.

"Should do the job."

The floorboards of the porch creaked. Frankie's mom stood at the top of the stairs with a dishtowel in her hand. She dabbed at the little hollow at the base of her neck.

"Hey, Alice," said Paul. "Hot enough for you?"

"Look, Mom, he got the timing gear kit." Frankie held up the box for her to see.

"The air conditioning's broken again," she said to Paul. "I thought we'd eat, then you could take a look at it. And the garden needs tending."

Paul looked up at Frankie's mom leaning on the porch rail, then flicked his cigarette butt on the ground and crushed it under the heel of his boot. He looked away, out toward the road. He shook his head.

"Come on," she said. "Come on in out of the sun. Have a bite to eat with me."

Frankie worked a fingernail under the tape that held the timing gear box closed, and peeled it away.

"I got to be out at Edith Whitman's place by three," said Paul.

The timing gear was really a couple of heavy gears, and a chain. Frankie picked up the larger gear and ran his finger over the teeth.

"Fine," said his mom.

"Alice," said Paul, but the screen door fell shut. Paul climbed the stairs and followed Frankie's mother inside, and Frankie rose and followed Paul.

She stood with the refrigerator door open, frowning. Frankie put the timing gear kit on the table and sat with his hands on the box. Paul took a seat across from him and leaned his chair back on its hind legs, but Frankie knew Paul wouldn't get yelled at for tilting his chair that way. While Frankie watched, Paul snapped open his lighter and spun the wheel and the flame ignited and flickered.

"I told you before," said Paul, and at first Frankie thought Paul was talking to him.

"Not now," said Frankie's mother, still standing in the cool of the open refrigerator door, and Frankie thought of all the times she'd told him *find what you need and shut that door, for heaven's sakes*. "I was going to make egg salad, but there's no mayonnaise."

Paul stood up. "You want me to take a look at that air conditioner, or what?"

"Frankie. *Frankie*," his mother said. "Run into town and get me some mayonnaise, you hear? Give him a couple dollars," she said to Paul.

Paul sat back down and tipped his chair back, and put his hands behind his head, and stared at her.

She opened the junk drawer and rummaged around, and came up with some coins and one dollar bill. "Go on, now," she said to Frankie. "It won't take you but an hour."

"A whole *hour*," he said.

"The sooner you go, the sooner you'll be back."

He stared at the dollar bill. It was wilted with the heat, already sweaty from her palm. It looked dirty.

He folded his arms. "You go."

His mother raised her eyebrows and her blue eyes became flat and calm and cold as pond water. Frankie sighed. He snatched the money from her hand and expected her voice to follow him out of the kitchen, *that's no way to behave, young man, you show some respect.* When he looked back through the screen door, though, she was sitting at the table. Paul lit a cigarette, and she held out her hand. He slid the pack across the table to her. She slipped a cigarette out and held it in her mouth, and Paul leaned across the table with his lighter. She inhaled, then let the smoke out through her nose in a thin, curling thread.

At the population signpost outside town, he hopped off his bike and took the chewing gum out of his mouth and stuck it smack in the middle of the second zero where the sign read, *Spring Garden, Population 1800.* He pushed his bike along the shoulder of the road. Past the Baptist church with its marquee announcing, *Revival, August 18 – 20.* Past the tavern with the door propped open by a cinderblock and a lone silhouette inside playing pool beneath a listlessly turning ceiling fan. Up the road was the mill where his father had been foreman, all the windows boarded over and big painted signs nailed to the walls. *For Sale.* For almost two years. Every fourth or fifth house with the same sign in the yard, and the grass overgrown, and the windows without curtains. The house next door to the grocery store had mildew growing on its siding, and an old woman on its porch sitting in a rocker, her hands in her lap, with her mouth open and her head hooked over the back of her chair as if someone had come along and snapped her neck.

Frankie bought the mayonnaise and then used the change to buy a chocolate bar with peanut butter on the inside. He tied the plastic grocery bag to his handlebars then stood outside in the sun next to his bike and peeled the wrapper away, smiling at his little defiance and thinking how when his mother asked where her change was, he'd just shrug and say, "I don't know," as casual as Paul. But when he bit into the candy bar, the peanut butter was gummy under the sweet chocolate, viscid and tough as leather. He spat his mouthful onto the ground.

Paul's truck was still parked behind the house, but Paul was gone. Inside, Frankie found his mother sitting at the kitchen table, smoking cigarettes from the pack Paul had left. Frankie put the mayonnaise on the counter. The eggs were sliced and piled on the cutting board. The yolks had turned hard and grayish, and they gave off a sharp smell, like body odor.

"Where's Paul?" said Frankie.

There were little pockets under both her eyes, where the skin looked puffy and soft.

"Get this filthy thing off the table," she said, and pointed her cigarette at the timing gear kit, still in its box.

Frankie held it against his chest.

His mother wiped the back of her hand against her mouth, and her lipstick came off in a red smear. She got up, and stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray she kept for whenever Paul was at the house. She went to the counter and looked at the eggs sliced up

on the cutting board. After a moment, she pushed them off of the board into the trash can.

"Paul's out in the barn," she said. "He couldn't fix the air conditioning. I'm going to have to get someone professional, I guess."

The timing gear was heavy in Frankie's hands. If Paul was in the barn, he might be pulling the canvas cover off the Road Runner and lining his tools up on the work bench, waiting for Frankie so they could put the timing gear in. Frankie didn't want to keep him waiting. But he lingered in the kitchen. His mother's fingernail polish was chipped. She cupped his cheek in her hand and her palm was cold against his skin. Clammy, as if she was coming down with a summer cold. She sat down at the table again and put her hand on the pack of cigarettes, but she didn't take one out. She sat that way, her hand over the pack, and Frankie thought of grasshoppers he'd caught and held under his domed palm, feeling the flutter of their bodies against his skin as they threw themselves helplessly about.

When his mother spoke, she kept looking at the pack, as if she was talking to it and not to him. "I had a dog once, did I ever tell you that?" she said. Frankie shook his head. "A little beagle. I called him Honey. I'd throw a ball for him to fetch, and he'd run after it, and just keep running. I'd cry every time he ran away, and make lost dog signs, and put them up all over town, and a week later we'd find him, just walking along the side of the road, stinking to high heaven from some dead thing he'd rolled in. And I'd take him home and wash him up, brush his coat and give him something to eat. And every time, he'd run off again."

The box fan thrummed and Frankie stood in front of it, hot and tired. His mother had taken off her apron.

"The last time Honey ran off, we didn't find him," she said. "I begged my daddy for another dog, but he said I couldn't even keep the one I had from getting loose."

"Mom," Frankie said.

She blinked at him. Frankie gestured with one hand at his own shirt and nodded his head at her. She looked down at herself, to where her blouse gaped open to show a flash of pink, something lacy and fine. She buttoned her shirt, and looked away.

Frankie closed the screen door gently behind him and walked across the backyard, where the grass was yellow and brittle. There was no shade anywhere because some disease had struck the two oaks that used to stand on either side of the barn and Paul had cut them down that fall, chopped them up and sold the logs off for firewood. At the back end of the yard there was a line of tall posts where he had started putting up a fence in May but never finished. Past the posts, trees stood like uncomfortable old women in the heat, limbs sagging. There was a pond back in those trees, a mile away down a narrow dusty path, cool and blue even on a day like this, where Paul had said he would teach Frankie how to do a backstroke, one of these days.

Paul was in the garden, kneeling next to the drooping tomato plants, tying them with twine to the stakes he'd driven into the ground. Always before, Frankie's dad had tilled and planted the garden, and he and Frankie would pick the tomatoes and snap beans and peas all summer and into the fall. This year, Frankie's mother had planted the garden, and it was Frankie's job each morning to water everything, angling the stream

into the air and watching the drops fall and cling to the leaves and soak into the dirt.

Still, the plants were stunted and choked by weeds and the dirt between the rows was dry and cracked.

"Hey, kid," said Paul. His pocketknife flashed in the sunlight as he cut the twine from the spool at his side. "You want to give me a hand here?"

Frankie shrugged. "Mom says I'm not supposed to use your knife."

"I'll cut, you tie the plants, okay?"

Frankie put the timing gear box on the ground and hunkered down next to Paul. He worked a bit of twine around the stalk of a tomato plant and around the stake, then tied a knot. Plant by plant, they worked their way to the end of the row. Paul scowled and cut lengths of twine, and handed them to Frankie without looking at him.

After a time, he held the knife out by its blade and said, "Go on. Take it. I won't tell your mom." He waited, then said, "I was going to give it to you, anyway."

"Really?" Frankie took the knife and touched the tip of the blade against the fleshy pad of his thumb. It drew a tiny bead of blood. "How come?"

From the trees came a sound like a tiny engine, a locust whirring louder and louder.

"I brought the timing gear with me," Frankie said. He closed his new pocketknife, then opened it again, admiring its sharp, thin blade.

"I saw that," said Paul. He stood up, and his shadow fell over Frankie. "Listen. You know, after I get that thing in, I'm taking off."

Frankie squinted up at Paul and couldn't see his face against the glaring sunlight.

"What do you mean?"

"Jesus Christ," Paul muttered. "I'm leaving. I been telling you all summer." He dragged a hand through his hair. "You're just like your mother, you know that?"

Frankie shook his head.

"Come on," said Paul. "Let's put this damn thing in so I can get out of here."

"You're leaving," Frankie said.

Paul was gathering up his tools, the spool of twine, the hoe he'd used to hack at the weeds. "You knew that," he said. "You knew that was the deal. My truck's shot to hell. I said I'd work out here, and I'd fix that car up, and the agreement was I could have it when I finished. What did you think, I wanted the Runner so I could drive around this shit town all day?"

"No," said Frankie. Out in the trees, the locust's whirring grew louder.

"That's right." Paul wiped his arm across his forehead. His face was sunburned and crumpled, as if he was in pain. "What am I supposed to do?" he said.

Up at the house, the screen door opened and Frankie's mother came out onto the porch. She shaded her eyes with her hand, then started toward the garden. She'd tucked in her blouse and taken her hair out of its pins so it fell onto her shoulders in soft curls. Paul turned and saw her coming. His shoulders dropped, as if the tools in his hands had suddenly become too heavy to hold.

There had been times before, all spring and summer long, when Frankie had seen his mother coming down the stairs in just this way and was seized by an irritation so deep

he'd felt his muscles quiver. She always came outside with words for him, go clean your room, time to get out of this sun, you've been pestering Paul long enough. Now, though, Frankie willed her to break into a run. Get over here fast and fire her words at Paul like pellets from a BB gun, tell him that he hadn't said any such thing about leaving the second the Runner was fixed, that it was a lie, and anyway, where would he go? Frankie gripped the knife. The blade glinted. This was meant to make up for Paul leaving. Paul got the Runner, got to drive away, and Frankie got the knife and all the other tools, too, the hoe and the twine, and all the hammers and screwdrivers on the workbench in the barn, all the wrenches and clamps and vises.

He took a step toward Paul, and another, and drew back his arm with the knife in his hand, the blade unfurled, and flung it at Paul. It struck him in the arm, not with the blade but with the handle. Frankie pushed past him, bent and snatched the timing gear box from the ground, then pushed past Paul again, ducked away as Paul tried to grab hold of him. He spat a curse, the kind of word he had never said aloud before, and he ran toward the trees, breathless and slick with sweat before he even found the path that would take him through the woods to the pond, but he kept running with the timing gear in his arms, weighing him down, like a stone.

When he came back, the yard was deserted. He saw through the kitchen window there was no one at the table, and the curtains over the other windows were drawn. Tired from his run to the pond and the slow walk back, he sat on the ground and leaned against the barn door and waited for a guilty feeling to settle over him, like the one he'd felt last

summer when his father's watch had slipped off his wrist while he was swimming. That was at the bottom of the pond, too. He closed his eyes and felt the sun on his face, and though the afternoon was still and humid, with the locusts loudly complaining in the trees, he smiled. At first Paul would be mad, but then he'd understand. He would save up for a second timing gear kit, and it would come in four to six weeks. By then he would see; he had to stay. They would put the timing gear in together, and afterwards take a ride down the country road and into town. The Runner was the same iridescent green as the beetles that clung to the undersides of leaves in the garden, shiny from a hundred polishings, with silver hubcaps that would catch the sunlight as they cruised up and down the streets. People would come out onto their porches and see them, Paul behind the wheel and Frankie next to him, and his mom, too, her loose hair lifted by the breeze that would come through the open windows.

A sound of metal upon metal made his breath catch, his eyes open. He stood and pressed himself against the wall of the barn and looked with one eye through a crack in the wood. As if they had also heard the sound, the locusts grew quiet. It was gloomy inside and hard to see at first. He cupped his hands around his eye. Faint light slanted in through the other cracks in the wall, and dust motes hung in the thick air, as if trapped in molasses. There were tools on the floor. Wrenches and ratchets, and all the cylinder-shaped sockets that usually sat in the tray of the toolbox, lined up by size. A low moan lifted out of the shadows. Frankie pressed against the wall. The passenger side door of the Runner was open. His mother sat on the seat, facing out, her feet on the dirt floor of the barn. Paul stood in front of her, with all the tools scattered on the floor around him.

She looked up at him, said something, her voice soft. Paul went to the car and stood with his back against the side panel, then slid down to the floor and sat in the dirt beside Frankie's mother. She hunched over. Talking to him. He sat on the ground. His knees drawn up. His hands over his face. Her hand was on his head. She stroked his hair. It was the way he was sitting, or how big the car seemed behind him, something, that made him look so small. There was another soft cry, and Frankie stumbled away from the barn because he knew the sound and he didn't want to hear.

He bent over and stood with his hands on his knees, staring at the bare ground where the grass didn't grow, and it was a comfort to look at something so brown and blank while his cheeks pulsed with heat. He squeezed his eyes shut and saw them again, Paul with his face against her leg, his mother with her hand cool against Paul's neck. He saw them as if he had caught them with no clothes on.

After a time he raised his head. There was the house, like a great crumbling tombstone. The white walls were speckled with dirt, and the porch sagged on one side, and there was a rip in the screen door Paul had patched badly, so that every day it seemed to tear a little more. White moths trembled in the air above the garden and landed on the cabbages. They looked pretty, but Frankie knew they would lay their eggs on the plants, and the caterpillars that came from the eggs would chew the leaves and destroy the cabbages. Paul should have known to spray the garden with insecticide, like Frankie's father would have. He should have fixed the air conditioner the first time it broke, and the tear in the door, too, and the sagging porch. All of it needed fixing, and Paul had fixed it, and now it was all broken again.

His mother was talking now, so quiet Frankie could not hear what she was saying but he knew the words anyway, how her voice was always a soft song after a scraped knee or hurt feelings. Someone pushed the Runner's door closed. They were coming out. His mother first, and then Paul, his eyes red. Frankie shook his head. He turned and ran toward the trees again.

When he got to the pond, he didn't stop to take his sneakers off but just jumped in and plunged his head under. He saw right away it was no good: The water was murky and full of debris. He kicked his way to the bottom, anyway, and scuttled across the pond floor and pushed his hands out against the water plants and the silky dirt. He touched something solid, hard and cold, a shape he knew wasn't right. But his chest burned with held breath, and he clutched whatever this thing in the water was and launched himself upward. He broke through the water and paddled over to where he could crawl out of the pond.

The sun had gone behind some clouds overhead. He looked at what he'd dredged up from the pond floor. Some big hunk of nothing, a heavy piece of trash someone had dumped in the water. People were always sneaking back here to dump their shit in the pond, they didn't care if they killed all the fish and made it so the water wasn't even nice to swim in anymore. They ruined everything. Frankie wiped his arm across his face. It was just pond water on his cheeks and streaming from his wet hair and dripping from his chin. He was a dry husk inside. The pond was still and flat and somewhere on the bottom the timing gear was already growing rusty and useless, but he wasn't sorry. He would push the whole Runner into the pond if he could.

He started back down the path through the woods, carrying the rusty hunk of metal he'd found in the water. He moved slowly; he felt weary down to his bones and could think only of going to bed, even though it was early yet. The metal thing he carried was heavier than the timing gear, covered in mud and cold in his hands, and he wanted to put it down, but he couldn't. He kept carrying it along until he came out of the trees and crossed the yard and stood at the bottom of the porch steps. He was soaked and dripping, cold enough to shiver even after the sun came out from behind the clouds again. Paul's truck was gone. Frankie looked up and saw his mother alone at the kitchen table, smoking a cigarette from the pack Paul had left behind.

When he came inside, she didn't say anything but stared at him like he was a stranger to her. A brownish puddle grew around him on the kitchen floor, but she didn't say *take those dirty shoes off* or ask him where he'd been or why he was so wet. She put her cigarette out. And even though she was still dressed in her clean blouse and her pretty skirt, she reached her arms out to him. He held the thing he'd dragged from the pond and stood before her.

## WE ALL GO THROUGH IT

While other teachers at Abraham Lincoln Elementary experimented with circle formations or allowed their students to sit together at tables, Ms. Shirley had arranged our desks in a perfect five-by-five square. She'd devised a seating chart that separated talkers, positioned the class cheater next to a notorious tattle-tale, and isolated Melvin Cornwell (the class thug) from Toby Link, who was small for his age. This arrangement also placed Marty Franklin at the head of row three where, for four weeks, he wrote in his notebook, and took his Friday spelling tests, and ate his afternoon snack. Then he disappeared.

Ms. Shirley's seating chart told us that our new teacher was perceptive and well-informed. She'd only been teaching at Abe Lincoln a year, but she'd learned things about us from our former teachers, just as we'd learned things about her from the previous year's fifth graders. We were prepared for her strict seating assignments, her recitation of the classroom rules on the first day of school, her quirks. Ms. Shirley's lectern was anchored at the front of the classroom, and she liked to stand behind it as she taught us about the history of the printing press or the importance of long division to everyday life. As she lectured, she swiveled her head almost mechanically, scanning first one side of the room, then slowly turning to survey the other. The effect, observed Fran Hanscomb, who sat at the back of row five, was not unlike watching one of those animatronic robots from

the Hall of Presidents at Disney World, where Fran's parents had taken her two summers ago. The president Ms. Shirley most resembled was Andrew Jackson.

From Ms. Shirley, we learned about Native Americans and Spanish explorers. We discussed photosynthesis and placed tomato plants under bright lamps to see how it worked. We learned to spell the words *finality* and *temporary* and *delicatessen*. Every morning, Ms. Shirley led us in the pledge of allegiance, hushed us for the principal's daily announcements, then took roll, marking a check next to each of our names in her grade book. Every Tuesday afternoon, we filed down the hall to Mrs. Hartley's room for Music Appreciation, and every Thursday at ten o'clock Ms. Shirley was replaced for an hour by the art teacher, who stored her supplies on a rolling cart and taught us how to make toothpick sculptures and leaf prints.

In those first four weeks of school, Marty Franklin traded baseball cards with Jeffy Denbrough and lost a game of Horse to Ray Zielasko during recess. He wrote a power paragraph about his summer vacation. He took his turn feeding the class guinea pig. Sometimes, in the middle of a spelling test or while taking notes about Paul Revere, he would, for no reason, lay down his pencil and look around the room at the rest of us, his fellow students, and a feeling would come over him, something he couldn't articulate, except to think how nice it was to know every face in the room. To know that Ray would always beat him in Horse and that *he* would always beat Nick Standard at foursquare. To know that it was best to avoid Melvin Cornwell, and that he could count on Jeffy to trade him a Twinkie for his pudding snack every day at lunch. Even Kyle Churchill, who had moved to town last year and was still referred to as "the new kid"—even he felt familiar

and right. Marty Franklin thought of the insides of a clock, the way his father had shown him once how each cog has its own job and how, together, the cogs and gears and wheels worked to turn the hands of the clock round and round.

Passing the new kindergarteners in the hall on his way back from the boys' bathroom, Marty marveled at how small they looked, walking two-by-two, holding hands and staring open-mouthed at him. He smiled at a pair of them and their eyes grew wide. Marty was in the fifth grade now, the top grade in the school. Next year, he would walk past Abe Lincoln Elementary every morning on his way to Wilson Junior High, where he would have a locker, and could try out for the baseball team. His mother had entrusted him with his own house key, confident that he was finally old enough to stay home after school alone. The key, strung on a piece of yarn around his neck, made him feel the same way he felt watching the kindergarteners scurry down the hall. Like the rest of us, Marty Franklin felt newly old, suddenly wise in a way he had never before imagined was possible. In class, he sat at his desk and twirled the key on its string, and watched the clock on the wall, certain that its hands were moving faster now. He glanced at Ms. Shirley, saw the teacher looking at him, and remembered he was supposed to be working. Marty Franklin ducked his head and went back to Paul Revere, i-before-e, long division.

Then, one day, his desk was empty. By the end of the fifth week of school, we realized that Marty Franklin wasn't coming back.

He stood in the space we left for him every time we lined up for lunch. During a school assembly, Fran Hanscomb sat next to Nick Standard in the gym and traced her

finger over the words *MJF was here* carved into the wooden bleacher. She stood near Ms. Shirley's desk, sharpening her pencils before the math lesson, and saw that in the teacher's grade book, left open on her blotter, Marty's name was gone. Between Cal Fenway and Judy Gillespie there was only the smudge of a hard eraser, and a tear where the paper had worn through.

None of us could avoid looking at his desk. Especially Ms. Shirley. As September gave way to October, she developed the habit of slipping her shoes off and slipping them back on while she stood behind her lectern. As she stepped out of her high-heeled shoes and back in again, over and over, Ms. Shirley alternately shrank and grew, up and down. It was, Fran said to Nick at lunch period, like being taught by a carousel horse. The more active Ms. Shirley's body grew, though, the less her gaze moved, until she spent entire lessons staring directly at Marty Franklin's empty desk. While we passed notes and drew pictures—notes Ms. Shirley would have previously confiscated and read aloud; pictures she would have seized and disposed of—our teacher addressed her lectures to the empty seat as though she could relay history lessons to her absent student in this way, wherever he was.

Fran Hanscomb and Nick Standard walked home from school together. At Mulberry Road, they paused at the chainlinked fence that enclosed Marty Franklin's yard. In the driveway, Mrs. Franklin's red minivan was parked under a basketball pole with a netless rim. Two newspapers sat on the front porch, each rolled in an orange plastic sleeve. The shades on all the windows were drawn. While Fran and Nick lingered at the

Franklin's gate, a brindled cat appeared around the corner of the house, jumped onto the porch rail, and lay down, its tail curled over its nose.

"That's his cat," said Nick. "She's supposed to be inside. She's an inside cat."

They put the toes of their sneakers through the holes in the fence and held on to the links along the top.

"You know the class picture Ms. Shirley took at the beginning of the year?" said Fran. "The one she hung on the wall by the door."

"Yeah," said Nick.

"Someone took it down."

They were both expected home by now. But they clung to the fence.

"Do you think anyone's home?" said Fran.

"The van's there," said Nick.

"What do you think is happening?"

The house was still and silent. Not even the cat moved now, asleep on the porch.

Nick said, "I don't know what's happening."

"Has anybody seen them?"

Instead of answering, Nick climbed down from the fence.

"Where do you think he went?" asked Fran as they neared the corner.

This was the question we asked of everyone. When Ms. Shirley said nothing, we thought our parents would take us aside and explain. We expected them to sit us down the way they did when we had questions about where babies came from, or why a grandparent didn't remember us anymore. Instead, they rose from the couch to snap off

the television whenever the news came on each evening. *He's gone*, they said. At bedtime, we stalled them with requests for glasses of water, then took tiny sips between questions. At breakfast, Kyle Churchill's mom let him have the cereal with marshmallows instead of making him eat the kind with a picture of a chicken on the box. The days began to shorten. Jeffy Denbrough spent whole evenings sprawled on the carpet in front of the T.V. while his mother and father stepped over him each time they passed through the den, neither one of them mentioning that he ought to get to his homework, or that he had chores to do.

At dinner, Fran picked at her meatloaf and pushed her peas under her mashed potatoes. Every time she looked up, she found her father staring at her from across the table. "What?" she said.

Her father ran a hand over his face. He said, "Frannie. When your mom died..." Fran swallowed, and her throat clicked, suddenly dry.  
Her father crumpled his napkin. He said, "Better get upstairs and finish your homework, if you're done eating."

She met Nick the following morning on her way to school, as usual. "Are your parents acting weird?" she asked him as they crossed Mulberry together.  
"Everybody's acting weird," said Nick.

On the Friday before Halloween, Ms. Shirley stood at the corner of the school building during recess, bundled in her thick wool coat. It was her week to monitor the schoolyard, but she stood every day in the same spot and smoked one cigarette after another, which we all knew was against the rules. None of the other teachers said

anything to her. Nick and Fran sat on the swings, their feet on the ground, and saw the principal go to Ms. Shirley. Mr. Mason wore gray suits and a different tie for each day of the week—Fridays were yellow fish swimming across a green-checkered field—and remembered everyone's name. He stood next to Ms. Shirley and touched her shoulder, and the teacher dropped her cigarette on the ground. Mr. Mason put his arms around her. Our principal and our teacher stood that way, so close, the shadow of them together falling across the brick wall of the school and looking smaller than it should have. It was a long time before the school bell rang. Nick and Fran sat on their swings, watching. From their places high atop the monkey bars, Melvin Cornwell and Cal Fenway saw too, as did Toby Link, who sat under the monkey bars with mud on his pants, having just been pushed off by Melvin and Cal. Judy and Stephanie turned their attention to the place where Ms. Shirley and Mr. Mason stood. Ray Zielasko, who no longer played Horse and instead rolled his basketball across the blacktop to Jeffy Denbrough, who listlessly rolled it back, watched too. We all saw, each of us wanting to say something to another, something about how strange this was, how unnatural. How it was like seeing the rain fall up from the ground into the sky.

That afternoon, in the middle of the Health and Wellness lesson, Stephanie Lemon began to cry for no reason. Ms. Shirley assigned us Quiet Work for the last hour of the day and sat at her desk, still wearing her coat, with her arms folded, as if for warmth. She stared at her pencil holder while we hunched over our desks and pretended to read about the Boston Tea Party. We remembered how once, when Kellie called Judy a bad word and made her cry, Ms. Shirley had taken Judy into the hall and spoken in a

soft voice, then brought her back to the class, dry-eyed and even smiling a little. Fran looked away from Stephanie and watched the leaves on the trees outside the classroom window instead. This time of year, they ought to have started changing color. But the leaves were green, still, as if confused by the weather, which was warm as summer one day and frigid the next. There was no telling what the weather would do these days. No way of knowing.

On Monday, we returned to class to find Marty Franklin's desk occupied by a boy in a red sweatshirt. The new student sat with his hands in his lap, facing the chalkboard at the front of the room. When Fran took her seat at the back of row five, the new student turned to look at her. He had pale blue eyes and under the hood of his sweatshirt his hair was yellow and uncombed. He smiled shyly at Fran, who stared back at him and thought, *That's Marty's desk.*

The previous year, when Kyle Churchill had moved from Chicago and joined us in fourth grade, Mrs. Philpot introduced him to the rest of us and invited him to "share something about yourself with your new friends." Kyle had scratched his nose in a way that looked to us suspiciously like he'd meant to pick it, but had just caught himself. He shrugged and said, "I don't know. Hockey's good."

So we knew there were protocols. Certain ways things should be done. Ms. Shirley waited for the final morning bell, then opened her grade book and called roll from behind her lectern. We responded, "Here," one by one, just as we'd been taught, until Ray Zielasko grunted at the sound of his name and Ms. Shirley closed her book, recorded

the attendance on the daily memo, and asked Kellie to take the memo to the office.

"Class," said Ms. Shirley, and we all looked at the new kid, expecting him to be called to the front of the room and properly introduced.

"Class," Ms. Shirley said again. "Let's open our science texts to page one-twenty-two. Who can tell me what *regeneration* is?"

The new kid raised his hand. "Teacher?" he said. "You didn't call me in the roll. 'Cause I'm new, I guess."

Ms. Shirley blinked at him. She had, as usual, been staring at Marty Franklin's desk when she instructed us to open our books, but not until the new kid spoke did she seem to register that for the first time in a month, Marty Franklin's seat was occupied.

"Oh," she said. She frowned at him, and it occurred to us that Ms. Shirley seemed more like the new kid than the new kid did. The teacher opened her mouth, hesitated, twisted her left earring. Her eyes touched each of us as her gaze wandered the room, as if she was waiting for one of us to answer an unasked question. Finally, she said, "I'm sorry. What's your name?"

"Michael," said the boy. "Michael Sagee."

"Michael," said Ms. Shirley. She took her pencil in hand but did not open her grade book.

"I moved here," the new kid continued. "Me and my mom. We just moved to town."

"Welcome," said Ms. Shirley, neglecting to correct him as she'd so often corrected us: *My mom and I.* "Everyone, please welcome Michael to the class."

We were silent. Stephanie and Melvin, who sat on either side of Marty Franklin's desk, flipped through the pages of their science books but continued to watch the new kid from the corners of their eyes. The rest of us watched him, too, and Ms. Shirley watched him. The new kid hooked one foot around the front leg of Marty Franklin's chair. He unzipped his jacket halfway, then zipped it back up. He opened his science book, and we wondered: Was that Marty's, too? Was Marty's name scrawled inside the front cover, just above Michael Sagee's?

Ms. Shirley tugged at the collar of her blouse. "Well," she said. "No one's answered my question yet. Who can tell me about regeneration?" She gazed at Marty Franklin's desk, and began the lesson.

At recess, we gave Michael Sagee a wide berth. We could see his red sweatshirt out near the corner of the open field behind the playground, where he played some strange game by himself, leaping from one patch of brown grass to another. Beneath the basketball net, Nick and Fran joined Ray and Jeffy, and the four of them watched him from where they stood, hands in pockets or arms folded. Ray spun the basketball on his finger.

The new kid ran from one end of the field to the other, and back again.  
"What a weirdo," said Jeffy.  
"He's just new," said Fran. "He doesn't have any friends. Who's he supposed to hang out with?"

Ray tossed his ball through the basket backwards and caught it when it tumbled over the side of the rim. No one—not the boys under the net with Fran, not the rest of

us—could move across the playground, could climb down from the monkey bars or abandon the swings and go to Michael, though we knew someone should. We had radar; all children do. We sought out our own kind, and could sense alternate versions of ourselves in each other. This was why Fran and Nick walked to and from school together every day. Why Ray and Jeffy spent every recess bouncing the basketball back and forth. On Kyle Churchill's first day of school in the fourth grade, he sat alone at lunch for all of five minutes before Madison Wise and Isaiah Sloan made their way to him, homing in on some signal the rest of us could not pick up. They were tuned to his frequency; we were not.

The bell rang. We streamed into the school building, none of us glancing over our shoulders though we could feel him there, trailing behind us, running to catch up in his red sweatshirt. Silently, taking our seats once more as Ms. Shirley quickly replaced a slender metal thermos in her desk and closed the drawer, we appraised Michael Sagee. We searched ourselves, each hoping that someone else would discover inside himself that pull toward a similar soul, toward the new kid.

The leaves on the trees outside the classroom window were green as springtime one day; the next, they were on the ground in a decaying heap. The sky went gray and stayed that way, always threatening snow but never delivering. For two weeks, a fluorescent light flickered and buzzed over our heads as we struggled to concentrate on fractions or state capitals, until finally it blinked out and plunged one corner of the room into shadow. When we looked at one another, we all seemed ghostlike, translucent.

The only bright thing in the room was Michael Sagee's red sweatshirt, which he wore every day. He was a quiet kid. After his brief self-introduction that first day, we never heard him say anything more, not even "here" during roll call. Stephanie dropped her favorite pencil—a lime green number two—and it rolled under the desk Michael had taken over from Marty Franklin, but she left it there for the janitor to sweep into his dustbin that evening. When the art teacher asked us to arrange our desks in a circle for our weekly lesson, we shot each other looks that telegraphed the message *Not me*. We scrambled to position ourselves as far from Michael as we could. Despite his silence, though, despite our own collective effort to pretend that he had never materialized among us, his very presence seemed to demand our attention. That red sweatshirt. That body, wedged into the desk that, for us, was still occupied by someone other than Michael Sagee.

At the head of the classroom, behind her lectern, Ms. Shirley was meant to be our guide, our example, the needle to our compass. We looked to her, at her, every day, and we saw that her suits had become frayed at the cuffs where her fingers picked at the tweed. She did not seem to own a single pair of stockings without a run. Her clothes were wrinkled and gray, and we speculated that she was forgetting—more and more often as the month unraveled—to wash her hair. Reading *Lord of the Flies* out loud to us after recess, she fell silent mid-sentence. She stared at her page, or at something just past the margin of the page, or at nothing at all, her eyes dull, her skin pale, the circles under her eyes darker than ever. She smelled of cigarette smoke and what Kyle Churchill informed us was gin.

When school let out each day, we streamed from the building in twos and threes and hurried down sidewalks toward home. It was getting so dark so early. Without noticing, Fran and Nick had taken to walking closer together, their hands almost touching, the two of them barely occupying half the sidewalk. It had become their habit to pause at Marty Franklin's house on their way home. Sometimes the cat would be outside, now thoroughly wild and rail-thin. Mrs. Franklin's red van was still parked in the driveway. Newspapers had piled up on the porch, and the mailbox was filled to overflowing.

"Look," said Nick, stopping short.

At the gate in front of the Franklin house, a figure in a red sweatshirt stood with one hand on the latch, the other in his pocket. Michael Sagee's face was hidden by his hood.

"Hey," called Fran.

Michael snatched his hand from the fence and shoved it in his other pocket. He turned his head away from them.

"Hey," Fran said again. "Michael? Hi. It's Fran. You know, from class."

Up close, Michael Sagee looked, Fran thought, like a mouse. Pale and pink-eyed. He sniffed the air like a mouse, too, then wiped at his nose with the sleeve of his sweatshirt.

"Are you crying?" Nick said.

"Was it Melvin?" asked Fran. "Somebody should've told you—don't get in Melvin's way."

"I got a cold," said Michael. He looked at the Franklins' house, and so Fran and Nick did too. Marty's cat dropped from the branch of a tree nearby into the yard, then slinked along the inside of the fence until it reached the gate. It looked up, and mewed.

"She's so skinny," said Michael. "Doesn't anybody feed her?" Fran stared at her shoes and Nick studied a rust spot on the chainlink fence. Michael looked at the house again, with its drawn shades and the leaves unraked and covering the front walk.  
"Doesn't look like anybody's home."

"No," said Fran.

"You guys wanna come over to my house?" said Michael. He jumped from one foot to the other. "I got a skateboard ramp, and comics, and my backyard's really good for playing spy. Come on, you guys! We could—"

"No," said Nick.

"Your parents won't let you?" asked Michael.

Fran and Nick both stared at him, until finally Michael turned away. At first, he walked down the sidewalk, but as they watched he began to run, until he was sprinting, and then out of sight.

Together, Fran and Nick stood on the fence and considered Marty's house, still and quiet under the darkening sky.

"I don't want to keep coming here," said Fran.

"Me either," said Nick.

None of us did. Out for a destinationless bike ride, on our way to a friend's house, walking home from the library, we all, all of us, made the same detour to the house on

Mulberry Road, thinking even as our feet took us there that we were weary of this. We did not want to return to the same spot again and again, always looking. We came back, against our own wishes, always missing each other. Or if we met a classmate at the gate, we would ask the same questions of each other, over and over, stuck in a loop.

Fran lowered herself from the fence. There were stones and wet leaves piled in the gutter along the sidewalk, and she found a fist-sized stone and pulled her arm back and chucked it at the Franklin house. It fell short of the porch, landing on the front walk then glancing off into the tall grass.

When you're a kid, everything lasts forever. Quiet time during tests, the wait outside the principal's office, the last ten minutes before the final bell—these moments stretch into eternity, endless sustained boredom that adults forget about too easily. They can't recall how as children they felt each second tick away in their bones. They have forgotten this strange paradox: how every second is actually a reminder of change. Of how fast everything will fade away, even while time seems to be a resource we will never completely use up. Under the surface of our boredom, something tells us this will not last. Our bodies tell us through their rapid growths, through the pair of shoes that fit perfectly yesterday and are now terrible on our feet. Through the picture in the yearbook of the stranger who wears our name. Our parents clutch their hearts as we climb trees, jump from roofs, careen down snow-covered hillsides; they warn us and marvel at our stupid bravery because they think we believe we will live forever, because they know better. But we are not heedlessly brave. We know without knowing that everything will

change before we're ready. We are compelled to touch everything because it will be gone before we are prepared for its absence, and there will be no one to explain why, or how.

Christmas holiday lasted a week that might have been a year. We tucked ourselves away in our houses, read books, played video games, fought with siblings, ate cookies, wondered if it was time to let go of Santa. There was no snow that year, and so there were no chance meetings on Cemetery Hill, where we had ridden our Flexible Flyers year after year. Our mothers suggested we invite one another over for checkers or videos, and we declined. Even Nick and Fran, who had practically grown up in each other's houses, avoided spending any time together. This, we thought, this was the solution to the absence we felt: more absence. This is what the adults meant when they said in voices they thought we couldn't hear that everyone must move on. Apart, we could feel whole; together, we were only reminded of loss.

Back at school after the holiday we were awkward with one another. Our post-Christmas comparisons of the presents we'd gotten were toned down and abbreviated, and after half-hearted attempts at conversation, we fell silent until the bell rang. For the first time that morning, we became aware that the teacher standing at the corner of Ms. Shirley's desk was not Ms. Shirley.

"Good morning, boys and girls," she said. She was shorter than Ms. Shirley, and rounder, and had tightly curled, iron-gray hair that clung to her skull as if it was wet. She wore half-moon glasses perched on a nose that Ray Zielasko would characterize as *piggy*. She surveyed us with raised eyebrows. "I said, 'Good *morning*, boys and girls,'" she

repeated. "Hasn't anyone taught you to return a greeting? Let me hear you say, 'Good morning.'"

"Good morning," we mumbled.

"Thank you, class." She turned and began to write on the blackboard in large, looping kindergarten-teacher letters. "My name is Mrs. Richardson. I will be your substitute teacher for the week. I hope that—"

"Where's Ms. Shirley?" Judy Gillespie asked.

"Excuse me—" The substitute consulted the seating chart she held in her free hand. "—Judy, but we do not talk out of turn in this class."

"You don't know what we do in this class," muttered Ray, loud enough for the rest of us to hear, though the substitute either didn't catch his words, or chose to ignore them.

She said, "I don't know why Ms. Shirley is unavailable, children. I imagine she's ill. I only know that your principal requested a substitute for the week, and that I am she. Now." She had written her name on the board, and beneath it, the title of our science textbooks, and a series of page numbers we already knew covered types of clouds and the water cycle. As she walked from the board to Ms. Shirley's desk to retrieve her teacher's guide, she bumped into Ms. Shirley's lectern. She bumped it again on her way back to the board then, *tsk, tsk-ing* at it as if it was a troublesome student, she grabbed the lectern and shoved it across the front of the room and into the corner next to the reading resources bookshelf. We looked at it there, displaced and smaller, somehow, without Ms. Shirley behind it.

"As your teacher didn't leave any notes," the substitute continued, "I thought we'd start today with precipitation."

"When will Ms. Shirley come back?" Stephanie asked, raising her hand as she spoke.

But Mrs. Richardson had her back to the room, was already chalking *cumulus*, *stratus* and *cirrus* onto the board. We plucked Stephanie's ignored question from the air and turned it over in our minds like a stone in our palms. We did not think of Ms. Shirley as someone who existed outside of the school building. Where could she be, if not here? We imagined her lost, wandering the streets of town like a ghost, unable to find her way back to us. Our attention returned to the lectern in the corner of the room. When Mrs. Richardson cleared her throat and remarked on our distractedness, we concentrated. Not on her, or on the science vocabulary written on the board, but on Marty Franklin's desk, where Michael Sagee sat, his red hood up, oblivious to our eyes on him.

That week was worse than the week we realized Marty wasn't coming back. Mrs. Richardson chided us for our inattention, our laziness, our silence in the face of every question she asked. On Thursday, our principal Mr. Mason took her aside and spoke quietly to her. After that, the substitute grew softer with us, and more distant, too. She ignored the notes we passed in class, and when she caught us reading comics behind our textbooks, she said nothing.

On Monday, we returned to find Mr. Mason at the head of the class, seated on the stool Ms. Shirley never used. He waited for us to take our seats, then cleared his throat.

"This has been...a difficult year," he said slowly. "A difficult year for us all."

The clock on the wall above the blackboard ticked. Mr. Mason swallowed, and the knob in his throat worked up and down. We watched it. We watched him, and we realized, each of us, that we were holding our breath, or leaning forward in our seats, or clutching something too hard—the sides of desks, lunch money from a pocket, one hand in the other. Ray Zielasko's pencil snapped in half, and the crack sounded through the room like gunfire.

When after a full rotation of the clock's second hand, Mr. Mason did not continue, Fran raised her hand.

"Mr. Mason? We just wanted to know. When's Ms. Shirley coming back?"

Mr. Mason nodded, smoothed his tie—purple stars against a red background—and cleared his throat again. When he spoke, his voice broke in the middle of words so that he sounded like a radio station going in and out of range.

"Your teacher—" he said. "Ms. Shirley. She's had...a hard time. She hasn't felt well since—since the beginning of the year. We've all—felt bad. And Ms. Shirley felt—she needed some time away."

He held his hands out, palms up, as if offering us something he'd forgotten to bring along.

"So," said Ray, "she's not coming back?"

"No," said Mr. Mason.

"Is she gone?" asked Stephanie Lemon.

Mr. Mason smoothed his tie again. He removed his glasses, put them back on. He scratched his head. Somehow, he'd moved closer to the classroom door.

"Yes," he said. "She's gone. But Mrs. Richardson has agreed to take over the class." She was already seated behind Ms. Shirley's desk, already opening the grade book in order to take roll as soon as Mr. Mason made his exit. "So everything can continue," the principal said. "You'll be able to get back to your regular work, and everything will be normal. Of course, you all know, you can come to me if you need to talk. About anything. Any time."

The door closed before we realized he'd left.

Mrs. Richardson clapped her hands, once, twice. The sound was sharp, and seemed to trigger all the other sounds in the room. We heard the heater that ran along the wall under the windows kick on, and the guinea pig in its cage squealed and scratched at its wood chips. Someone with a cold sniffed loudly.

At recess that day, none of us lined up for a turn on the swings, or climbed the monkey bars, or took our places in the foursquare grid. Ray brought his basketball outside, but held it in his arms rather than shooting it at the net. Like the rest of us, he was watching Michael Sagee.

"Hey, new kid," called Melvin Cornwell from where he stood with Cal Fenway near the baseball diamond.

Michael halted in his peculiar game of hopping from spot to spot and turned to find Melvin closing in on him, with Cal right behind. Ray and Jeffy crossed the schoolyard and edged closer to see what would happen. We all came, our circle around Michael at first loose and formless, but tightening with every step we took.

"I'm not new," said Michael.

"You make me puke," said Melvin, his most cutting insult. His hands balled themselves into fists.

Cal said, "Why'd you even come here, new kid? Little freak. Go back to where you came from."

"Leave me alone," said Michael. He threw his gaze around at the rest of us. His eyes met Nick's, and he said, "What do you want?"

Nick shook his head. Next to him, Ray held his basketball in both hands, as if ready to shoot. On his other side, Fran stood with her arms folded, as if trying to hold herself back. Nick felt the same urge to rein himself in, to cut away from the group and run across the playground to where Mrs. Hartley, that week's monitor, stood talking with the second grade teacher near the slide. He wanted to go to Mrs. Hartley and point across the playground to where we stood. To tell on us, himself included.

Instead he said, "Stop us."

Cal took up Nick's words. "Yeah, stop us, shitface. Just try it. What're you gonna do?"

"No—" said Nick, but none of us heard him because when Ray interrupted, he was nearly yelling, telling Michael, "Everything was fine before you came here!" and though we all knew this wasn't true, that Michael Sagee had done nothing wrong, we began to shout at him. We swore at him, called him a freak, a fake, a no one. We told him to go home, to go back to where he came from, to go to hell. We knew our voices carried across the playground, and some of us looked back over our shoulders, expecting to see a grownup darting across the brown grass. We screamed at Michael and drew

closer to him, and he backed himself up against the fence that contained the playground. Why wouldn't they stop us? Michael flattened himself against the fence, looked up, seemed to consider trying to climb it.

Then Ray threw his ball. It shot from his hands as if he was passing during a game—a quick, direct throw that hit Michael square in the face. Stunned, Michael did not cry. He blinked at Ray, openmouthed, and Ray looked back at him, just as shocked at what he'd done.

We don't know who threw the rock. None of us did; we all did. It left a cut above Michael's right eye that blossomed bright red, a red the color of his sweatshirt. Then there was another, and another, and someone threw their own lunchbox at him, and Melvin grabbed and shoved, and through all of it Michael was quiet, quiet, never screaming for help. No one came to stop us. We closed in around him so tightly that he disappeared. Most of us couldn't see where our kicks and jabs landed, and some of us would come out bruised ourselves, scratched and scraped from the blind attacks of our classmates. We drew so close, we worked him out of ourselves like a splinter from tender skin; at some point, he squeezed between someone's legs and ran away. We think. We don't know—only that eventually we realized he was gone. Our hands fell to our sides when the school bell sounded. We avoided each other's eyes as we drifted across the playground. We took our seats in class. Mrs. Richardson did not remark upon the empty desk at the head of row three.

Michael never came back to class. Things went back to normal. This is what Mr. Mason had said would happen, what our teachers wanted, what our parents expected—

that we would somehow accept the unexplained absences in our lives, that we would come to regard them as unextraordinary and go back, always, to normal—and so this is what they saw. If for the rest of the school year we were quieter, if we were almost formal with one another, like polite strangers briefly together on an airplane, the grownups told themselves that this is how children are: they grow up, grow apart, become an *I* rather than a *we*. They shed their old friendships and alliances, and discover new ones. This is how it is done, they might have told us, had we asked.

## NDAHAFA

I was already twenty minutes late for my last appointment of the day, but I lit another cigarette and sat smoking in the Andowa family's driveway, the car's engine still running. I slipped two fingers into my breast pocket and withdrew a business card. *Landreth's Hardware, Calumet, Illinois, Since 1920.* I'd gone there weeks ago to pick up the paint Libby had wanted for the baby's room—canary yellow, the color that is neither blue nor pink, the one chosen by parents who want everything to be a surprise. The corners of the card were rounded and furry with handling. For a week, I'd been carrying it in my pocket, taking it out, turning it over in my hand. I'd read the telephone number scrawled on the back of the card so many times, I had it memorized. I'd jotted the number down in the only moment of certainty I'd had in months. Better Business Bureau, Illinois Division. But I hadn't made the call, not that afternoon when I'd copied the number from the phone book, then hastily shoved the card in my pocket when Libby walked in on me. Not then, and not the next day, not any time.

I stubbed my cigarette out in the ash tray, then spritzed the air with the scented freshener I kept in the glove box. The mist settled on my sports jacket. I tucked the card back into my pocket. Put the car into reverse. Then slipped the car back into park, turned the engine off, grabbed my briefcase, and got out.

I hadn't even knocked on the door when it swung open. I'd read the file on the Andowa kid the night before, had gone over it three times, but all I'd learned was the

usual information: GPA, extracurriculars, sports. I knew how much money the parents made—less than Libby and me, even now that she'd stopped working, with the baby on the way. According to my file, the dad worked at the Purina factory an hour away, across the river in St. Louis; the mom was a nurse. But I hadn't read anything to prepare me for Nelson Andowa, a slender black man with wire-rimmed glasses and a thin mustache who spoke with an accent I only knew from movies about Africa.

"We have been expecting you," he said. "Did you have trouble finding us, Mr.—"  
"It's Konrad," I said. I glanced over my shoulder, like I thought maybe there was someone else Andowa was expecting, someone besides me. There was just the lawn, and then the highway, and then a field full of fall corn that needed harvesting. The town I'd grown up in was two counties over, bigger than Piasa Township, where the Andowas lived, but not by much. Six years out of high school, I still remembered the names of every black kid in my class. There were only a handful of them, transplants from Chicago and St. Louis who'd always looked a little bewildered at having ended up in lily-white Four-H country.

"I'm sorry I'm late," I said, shaking Nelson Andowa's hand. "It's been one of those days, you know?"

*Invite familiarity. Offer your first name when you shake hands. Approach the meeting as you would a visit with friends, not a business proposition.* When I took the job my father-in-law offered me, he'd put his arm around my shoulder and gave me a copy of the book he'd self-published, a slender guide called *The Art of the Sale*. "Your

bible," David Champlin had called it. *Upon entering the home, offer a sincere and appropriate compliment.*

There was no front hallway. The door opened directly into a brightly lit living room, where the Andowas had arranged two mismatched loveseats on either side of a coffee table. A white linen covered the table, and lined up along its center was a series of porcelain frogs, each in a different pose. A frog with a bowtie and a top hat, in spats; a frog in a straw hat, carrying a fishing pole; a frog with a book in its webbed hands. My mother, before she died, had a similar set of porcelain creatures—cats instead of frogs, all of them dressed in sweaters.

The Andowas watched me, silent, expectant. This was my show, after all. I was the one who'd contacted them, who'd invited myself into their home with promises of an opportunity they wouldn't want to pass up. I shifted my briefcase from one hand to the other, adjusted my tie, and stood there, searching for something to say. It wasn't like me to come off as unprepared. Back at the office, a glum little cubicle-filled room, my photo hung on the wall under the words "Employee of the Year." My uneasy smile was supposed to be an inspiration to the handful of other salesmen. Despite myself, I was good at what I did.

"What a nice collection," I said. Even to my own ears, the words sounded robotic. I tried again. "You have a very lovely home," I said to Mrs. Andowa.

The son, who was twelve, smiled shyly at me when he was introduced. "And this is our daughter, Saima," said Nelson Andowa. "She is now a senior at the high school."

She took the hand I offered, but didn't say anything. Just stared. She had these unreadable eyes, so dark you could barely see the pupils, and she looked straight at me, not smiling, not frowning. She was taller than either of her parents, all long legs and grace. If I were a different kind of salesman, I might have made some comment—something that would've made the parents chuckle politely and the girl cringe with embarrassment, something about how all the boys in class must be in love with her. I said hello and left it at that.

"Will you have tea?" asked Mrs. Andowa.

*Accept offers of coffee or tea. As soon as you can, move the focus of the conversation to the student's interests.*

"Yes, thank you," I said.

Saima and her brother hovered near the couch. "Should I stick around?" she asked her father, who glanced at me.

"It's just numbers and stuff at this point," I said. She was staring at me again, and I flashed a smile, eager to get her out of the room so I could do what I'd come to do, then split. "Paperwork. Lots of acronyms. Boring stuff."

When the kids had gone and the adults were seated, me on one loveseat, the Andowa couple on the other, all of us holding delicate tea cups in our hands, I said as earnestly as I could, "Thank you for inviting me into your home to talk to you about what the National Scholarship Foundation can do for your daughter."

And then I felt my mouth go dry. I sipped my tea, and the Andowas watched as if this was the prelude to a magic show, as though any minute I might pull a rabbit out of

my briefcase. Wave a wand and instantly fix their daughter's future into place. There were things my father-in-law had told me about his business—things he hadn't put in his book. "Just let them talk," Champlin said as we drove to my first sales call three years before. He'd apprenticed me himself rather than leaving it to one of his underlings. "That's the most important thing: Let them talk, and they'll talk themselves into buying whatever you have to sell." And on another call, as we glided in his BMW past brown cornfields and farmhouses with foreclosure notices taped to their doors, he said, "With kids, there are a million things to worry about. Drugs, grades, detentions. Whether Junior's going to knock up some girl. So you come in and say, I'll take care of it." His voice grew stentorian. I thought of him then as the hero in one of those old black-and-white films, the incorruptible senator, the bright-eyed go-getter, full of hope. "This one thing, Mom and Dad, one *more* thing you have to worry about—I'll take care of it. I'll make sure Junior gets into the right school, that'll lead to the right career, that'll make him plenty of money, keep him safe, make him happy." Champlin winked at me. "What parent is going to say no to that?"

I cleared my throat. Across the room, I spotted a photograph on top of the television set. The two kids, brother's hand on sister's shoulder, both of them in sports jerseys. They were posed in front of a backdrop like the one I remembered from a similar picture of myself that used to sit on my folks' fireplace mantel.

"Looks like we've got a couple athletes in the house," I said.  
"Saima made the varsity track team her sophomore year," said Nelson Andowa.  
"She broke the regional record last year for the one hundred meter hurdles."

"And she is the anchor for her relay team," said Mrs. Andowa.

I let the Andowas tell me all about their daughter. Track, AP chemistry and trig, choir and quiz bowl. This was what I still loved about the job—the way the parents could talk endlessly about their children, the sports clubs, the bids for homecoming king or queen. I could listen all day, and not because of the sale. It was because of how they looked. The child's every hardship and success, every hope—it was all etched into the parents' faces. My own kid was still on the way, but I'd been at the job long enough that I thought I understood the worry the parents carried with them. How it was fear of the future that made them want to place that worry in my hands. The houses I visited were all the same: secondhand furniture, home-made curtains, drought-dry crops outside and stacks of bills on the table. And all the parents wanted the same thing for their kids. Just happiness, their faces said to me. Happiness for our children. I let them talk, and they talked themselves into filling out the forms in my briefcase and writing their checks out to the National Scholarship Foundation.

I had liked the job when I first started. Or I had liked Champlin, and wanted him to like me. I knew how I seemed. The son of Polish immigrants, accentless but still awkward, trying to look like every other farm-kid-turned-college-boy in the tri-county area, John Deere baseball cap included. Not exactly marriage material for the daughter of a man who owned his own successful business and wore suits instead of Carhartts. I had a speech prepared for Champlin, reasons why I'd be a good husband for his daughter, but I never got to deliver it. Libby showed him the ring, he beamed, said congratulations, then offered me a job. He had the soft hands of someone who manipulated stacks of

paper all day. My own hands were calloused from years of helping my dad out on the farm, and I took to hiding them in my pockets or behind my back those first few weeks at the new job. "Don't be embarrassed, Konrad," my new father-in-law told me. "Those are honest hands. Those are hands that tell the locals here that you're just like them. That you've got their best interests in mind, because you know where they're coming from. That they can *trust* you."

They trusted me; I had the sales record to prove it.

The Andowas had moved on to their son. He was in junior high, in the band, second chair clarinet. He played American football. Hearing that, I was seventeen again, rolling my eyes at my father, who never learned to drop the "American," either, or to stop referring to soccer as "football" no matter how often I corrected him. By the time I'd made varsity, my mother was gone, and the farm, after years of frustration and disappointment, was finally beginning to turn a profit. My father didn't have time to take much notice of anything I was doing then. He saw I was finally fitting in; that was all that mattered.

"Your daughter being in sports," I told the Andowas, "that's a very good thing. There are plenty of private scholarships out there for talented athletes. National Scholarship Foundation offers a special plan you might be interested in, actually, tailored for athletes."

I was on autopilot. I opened my briefcase and spread out the pamphlets and brochures, showed them the complicated-looking grid that gave evidence of the high cost of a quality education. *No obligation whatsoever*—the words left my lips like an

innocent kiss. Nobody was obligated to do anything. But at the informational seminar the Andowas would be invited to, there would be more promises, offers too good to pass up. A little money spent now—only \$500 to get the process started—why, what was that in comparison to the thousands of dollars, tens of thousands, in scholarships your child could be awarded? Later, the Andowas would be assured that the NSF could get their daughter into a specific school, one that needed a hurdle-jumping soprano with a 4.0 GPA and an interest in chemistry; there would be an additional fee for that paperwork, of course...

I wasn't involved in that end of things. My association with the client ended after the initial meeting. But Champlin had written in his book, *As a salesman, you are the face of the company. The client's future affiliation with NSF depends entirely upon you.* It all started with me.

I went on talking, and watched the Andowas' faces for a change in expression. A sideways glance. A suspicious frown. I'd been waiting for something like that for weeks, part of me actually wishing for it. The Andowas perched on the edge of their loveseat, leaning over the colorful charts and fact sheets that covered the coffee table. They would be especially interested in the add-on Premium Plan, I told them, a service that would grant them high-priority access to an exclusive list of private scholarships unavailable to the general public. Across the room, Saima had emerged from the hall to lean in the doorway, her arms folded. I reached into my pocket to take out a pen emblazoned with the NSF logo—*always have a pen ready for filling out forms*—and with the pen came the

Landreth's Hardware business card. It fell out of my pocket and landed on the table, face-down.

"Oh, may we keep your card?" said Nelson Andowa, picking up what I had dropped.

"That's not—" I snatched the card from his hand. "I'm sorry," I said. "That's not my—that's a different thing. I don't have any cards. Not on me." I offered him the pen instead. "Listen, do you have a phone? I mean, could I borrow it? While you look over these forms."

"Of course," said Mrs. Andowa. "In the kitchen, just through that door."

*Remain on hand for questions. Without the guidance of an agency representative, your clients may become confused about the various services NSF has to offer, and confusion may lead to hesitation.* "Hesitation," Champlin had told me, "is death for a sale."

I went to the sink and ran the water, cupped my hand and drank a palmful. I'd been carrying that card around forever, it seemed, not using it, taking it out of my pocket and putting it back in, chewing on its corners, even, while I hemmed and hawed over what to do. If cell reception wasn't so spotty in the rural counties where I hawked the NSF's cornucopia of services, I might have already made the call. Just that Wednesday, I'd pulled into a Casey's for gas and a quick bite, and I'd found myself with the receiver of a public pay phone in my hand, my other hand in my pocket, fishing for a quarter. Nothing. I could've just gone home at that point, of course, gone home and made the call from there, brought an end to everything. Instead, I replaced the handset in its cradle,

then drove to a dairy farm outside Gillespie and sold two plans at \$500 each to a couple with twin high school seniors, the oldest of seven children.

The Andowas had an old corded phone mounted on the wall next to the refrigerator. For seven months, I'd been borrowing telephones in countless houses, always turning my back to my clients for a little privacy. I called Libby at least twice a day. Just checking in. I'll be home in time for dinner. How are you feeling? Sometimes she had a backache. Other times she'd just felt the baby kick, and wished I'd been home for it. Always, she told me, "Do good work," instead of saying goodbye before she hung up. Every time, I listened to the soft click of the line going dead and I thought, *It's not good work.*

I dialed, and she picked up on the third ring. "How's your day?" Libby asked. "Guess what finally got delivered this morning? The crib! The nursery looks like a nursery now."

Somewhere in the trunk of my car, buried under the NSF forms and promotional packets, was that old copy of *The Art of the Sale* Champlin had given me when I signed on with him. When I married his daughter. To him, I thought, it was the same thing. Inside the book's cover, he'd written, *The woman you're about to marry is the most important thing in my life. Make her happy.*

I crumpled the Landreth's Hardware card in my hand. "How're you feeling?"  
"Rotund. I'm so ready to have this baby."  
"Not too much longer now," I said.  
"You sound funny."

"I'm okay." I rested my forehead against the humming refrigerator. The oven timer sounded on Libby's end of the phone; she was already starting dinner, getting ready for me to come home. At least once a week, we invited Champlin over to eat with us. Whenever he showed up, Libby threw her arms around him like she hadn't seen him in years. Growing up, it had just been her and him, moving from place to place—California, Arizona, Utah. They'd even lived in Alaska and Canada for a while. All that moving had made my wife an intensely private person, a person keenly aware of the privacy of others. Champlin never talked about certain things—politics, his wife's death, his business—and Libby never pressed him. She asked about his golf game, what he was reading lately, if he liked the chicken fixed this new way, and she smiled across the table at him. Unaware. Meanwhile I kept forked food into my mouth, chewing and swallowing so I couldn't say anything.

"Your dad's not coming to dinner tonight, is he?" I asked.

"No, he's got some poker thing," said Libby. "Dinner'll be ready in about an hour. You'll be home then?"

"I've been smoking again," I said. The words left my mouth like a hiccup—unexpected, abrupt. "Just...lately. A pack a week, maybe. Not a lot."

Libby was quiet. Then she said, "I know."

"You do?"

"Of course," she said. "Kon, I drive the car, too. Cinnamon apple air freshener can only cover up so much."

I smoothed out the business card, ran my thumb over the face of it. "You didn't say anything."

"No," she said. "I figured you'd tell me when you told me."

"You're not mad?"

"I think it's a gross habit, but it's your business. Just don't do it around me. Or the baby."

"I'm quitting, anyway," I told her.

I promised to be home for dinner, then hung up. In the living room, Mr. and Mrs. Andowa were bent over the forms on the coffee table, their heads almost touching. They talked in low voices, words I couldn't make out from where I stood in the doorway.

Nelson Andowa shook his head. My heart did a little jump in my chest. Any moment now, he would put down the pen. Any moment, his wife would say something to him about the funny feeling she had. Something not quite right. I should have been out there, sitting across from them, explaining. *Your job as a representative of NSF is to illuminate each facet of our extensive scholarship service, leading your client to the most appropriate plan, based on his child's talents, aspirations, and financial need.* I stood, caught in the doorway, and imagined Nelson Andowa picking up the NSF form and tearing it in half, then tearing it again, and again.

Instead, he picked up the pen and began filing out the form, in triplicate. Not all the information he supplied was necessary. But it had to look right. There should be just enough paperwork to make the parents feel the effort, but not so much it would overwhelm them. Champlin had told me this early on, though not in so many words. He

had a way of talking, of cloaking one meaning with another. And he was careful. He kept things compartmentalized. The salesmen were all kids straight out of college, the kind of employees who never stayed longer than a year, and they didn't have much contact with the folks who ran the informational sessions. And no one saw much of the researchers who compiled those exclusive, "specially tailored" lists of private scholarships that were actually all the same list—just one list for every family, no matter which plan they signed up for, no matter how much they paid. The list was compiled from an internet search any web-savvy high school kid could do himself. I understood all of it now. Most of it. Enough to have worried a good six months about what to do.

*National Scholarship Foundation: Ensuring a Bright Future for the Children of America's Heartland.* It was the subtitle printed across the cover of *The Art of the Sale*, and those first days of my apprenticeship it had actually made me feel proud. Here I was, an adopted son of America's heartland, sent to college on the sweat-stained money my immigrant father had wrenched from his soybean fields. And now I was ensuring a bright future for farm kids just like I had been. Making up for the mistakes of my youth. I tucked the little book in my breast pocket and those first few months on the job I'd take it out once in a while to read Champlin's advice, even after I'd memorized every word.

"You're catching on quick," Champlin told me a few weeks into my apprenticeship. We were on our way back from a call; he'd let me take the lead this time, and I'd made my first sale. "I think you understand what we're all about," said Champlin as he steered the BMW down an unlined country road. "You know, a parent will do anything for his child. I'm not just talking about sacrifice, though that's part of it. Love,

too. But it's more than that. It's about trying to fix the past. Look at your old man: He came to this country for you. It's about happiness. And it's all wrapped up in your kids." His voice lost its usual declamatory tone and softened. "It never stops, you know? Even after they're grown, you just keep wanting everything for them."

By the time I realized what was going on, it seemed impossible to untangle myself without hurting someone. Everyone. Libby had a framed photo of her father and me on the nightstand on her side of our bed. Him and me on a fishing trip together, his arm around my shoulders. Champlin was the kind of guy who was never caught looking away from the camera, whereas I always seemed to blink at the wrong moment. From that photo, he watched over Libby as she smiled in her sleep. Over me, as I lay awake and tried to imagine a scenario in which we all came out of this okay.

The Andowas were going over the forms one last time, making sure everything was filled in correctly. There was a bookshelf against the wall on the other side of the room, but instead of books most of the shelves were lined with trophies and plaques, ribbons that had been mounted in frames. There were photographs, too, of Saima in her track suit, the son in his football uniform. At the center of the top shelf, the largest plaque read *Piasa Township High School Sportsmanship and Integrity Award, Saima Andowa*. I watched Nelson Andowa hand his wife one of the brochures I'd laid out on the table, and I didn't need to hear him speak to know that he was telling her that everything was going to be okay now. I saw my own father, sitting there. Champlin on the other side of the table. Full-color pamphlets fanned across the table cloth. My father-in-law rattles off strings of acronyms. Assures my father, "It all sounds very complicated

but that's why I'm here—so you don't have to worry about what all those letters stand for." My own trophies, dusty on the fireplace mantel. "You might be particularly interested in our plans for young athletes, Mr. Zijlstra. I see your son plays football." My father's back is to me. Hunched over the forms. He doesn't look up. *My son no more plays football.* Champlin smiles. Inches the required documents closer to my father. Offers him a pen, a nice one, a pen that's special-ordered and feels heavy in the hand, expensive. "Keep it," he says. It's his voice, but it's my voice, too, exactly the words I've said a hundred, a thousand times. "Just a little thank-you gift from NSF. Whether you're interested or not in what we have to offer, that's yours to keep." Over my father's shoulder, he locks eyes with me, and winks.

I backed into the kitchen and then turned and went out the back door of the house into the yard, and fumbled in my pocket for a cigarette, and lit it. I inhaled, my eyes closed, then breathed out a cloud of smoke.

"Those things'll kill you."

She didn't have her parents' accent. Saima stood next to a picnic table under an oak tree. She'd changed into a pair of shorts, a ratty tee shirt, running shoes. She planted one foot on the top of the table and grabbed the toe of her shoe and stretched her hamstring.

"You must really like to run," I said, then cringed. I'd seen some of the other salesmen in the office try to make friends with the kids. They told dumb jokes or feigned interest in high school clubs, tried to look cool, tried to relate. Kids always knew when you faked it.

Saima rolled her eyes.

I took another drag from my cigarette. "Where are your parents from, anyway?"

"Namibia," she said. She stretched the other leg. "That's in *Africa*."

"Thanks," I said.

"So you're going to send me to college, huh?"

*Often, your client will not be familiar with even the first steps to ensuring his child's academic success. It is up to you, the salesman, to gently guide your client to the NSF plan best suited to his child's needs.*

"It's just a scholarship service," I told her. "We give your parents a list. A bunch of private scholarships. It's up to you guys to apply for them."

She hopped up and down, then stopped and stood with her hands on her hips.

"Yeah," she said. "My track coach says I'm the best on the team. I'm not bragging, that's just what he says. I'm going to go to state this year. Break a few records. Get noticed. I know how it works. I been talking to coaches. *College* coaches. Last year, when I broke the county record, I sent the tape my coach made out to a bunch of people. And they called me up, just like that."

"That's pretty smart," I said. "Sending out your tape."

"I know."

She stretched her calves, then ran in place. The sun was out, and her skin was so dark it seemed to drink the light, to swallow it and internalize it, so it shone from those eyes of hers, still on me. How the hell did you get here, I wanted to ask her. All the way here, where there was no one like her, and things would only ever be hard. But she

would just shrug. If I asked her, she'd lift one slender shoulder and roll her eyes with that casual ignorance kids get to have. She didn't have to know, that shrug would say. All she had to do was run as fast as she could.

I looked out past the yard, where the fields on this side of the highway had already been harvested and broken corn stalks and rotting ears scattered the ground.

"I went to high school around here," I said. "A couple counties over."

"Yeah? You do any sports?"

"Football," I said. "Wide receiver."

"You get a scholarship for college?"

I shook my head. "My senior year, I made a bunch of money on a point-shaving scam. Me and some other guys on the team, we took money from some of the parents—some of the dads who liked to bet. They paid us to beat the spread. All we had to do was win but keep from winning by as much as we were expected to. But one of the other guys started feeling guilty, went to the school superintendent. We all got booted off the team." I dropped my cigarette butt on the ground and crushed it with the toe of my shoe.

Saima let out a low whistle. "You really screwed up, huh?"

I nodded.

"Bet your parents were pissed."

"Listen, Saima—"

"That's not really my name, you know," she said. "In Namibia, they have this thing. You have your house name—that's the name your family calls you at home. It means something. And then you have your other name, the one you tell everybody else.

Saima." She looked right at me. "My real name's Ndahafa. That's what my folks call me. Wait here a sec, okay?"

She ran inside. I took my cell phone out of my pocket and checked the time. I was going to be late for dinner, after all. When Saima came back outside, she had a VHS tape in her hand.

"Watch that," she said. "You can keep it, too. I got another copy." When I reached out for the tape, she held onto it for a second. "They're not stupid," she said, her eyes on mine. "I just want you to know that. They don't always get how stuff works here, but they're not stupid, and neither am I."

I took the tape. "I know."

"You left this on the kitchen counter."

She held out the Landreth's Hardware business card.

"You keep it," I said.

She shrugged and stuck the card in the pocket of her shorts.

I held the tape up and said, "Thanks for this. Ndahafa." Through the open window of the house, I could hear voices. Mr. and Mrs. Andowa. Coming to find me. I felt for my car keys in my pocket. "What's it mean, anyway? Your name."

For the first time, she smiled at me. "Happy," she said.

That evening, after Libby had gone to bed, I stayed up to watch Saima's tape. I sat on the sofa with a stack of NSF files beside me, my beat up copy of *The Art of the Sale* on top of the stack. In the foreward, Champlin had written, *What your client doesn't*

*know can hurt him. As an NSF salesman, you'll uncloak the secrets of college admissions for your client, guaranteeing a trouble-free application process and a bright future for your client's child.*

Saima's coach had started the recording during stretches, and Saima stood with her profile to the camera, swinging her arms, loosening her muscles. "How do you feel?" asked a voice off-camera. Saima turned her head and nodded, and said, "Ready."

The tape cut to her event. She crouched in the blocks and the camera zoomed in on her face. She stared at the ground. Her lips moved silently. Then she looked up, her eyes focused on the hurdles ahead. The camera zoomed out, and there were the Andowas in the bleachers, calling out her name, *Ndahafa, Ndahafa*. Her eyes were steady. At the sound of the starting whistle, she shot out of the blocks. At the first jump, her right leg kicked forward and for the briefest moment she was airborne. Her left leg curled behind her, then she brought it around, and landed, still in motion. She left the other racers behind. Each time she jumped, her hands clutched, as if she could pull herself forward by grabbing onto nothing. She came over the last hurdle and her limbs sliced through the air. The other runners stumbled their way to the finish line, but she glided through, sleek and surefooted. She raised one hand above her head, fist held high, then wrapped her arms around herself, and threw her head back, smiling into the sky, still running, carried forward by her own momentum.

## TURNAGAIN

Back at the house after the mostly silent car ride from the airport, Easley carries the girl's bags up the walk and sets them inside the door, then shows her where she'll be sleeping. There is only one bedroom, but he has taken down the mounted king salmon and he has changed the sheets on the bed and put away his magazines and cleared a space in the closet for her clothes. On the wall beside the bed, next to the window, he has tacked up a poster he bought in town. A flowering field, a pony galloping toward a trio of faraway dark mountains.

"Your mom said you liked art," Easley says.

The girl stands before the picture, silent. She hasn't taken off her jacket yet.

She says, "I'm supposed to call and let her know I got here okay."

In the kitchen, he turns on the stove and warms the skillet and mixes a pancake batter while she makes her call from the den. All he can hear of her end of the conversation is *uh-huh* and *okay*, though she goes on at length about the flight from Raleigh to Anchorage, the quality of the airplane food and the movies that were shown. She mumbles, "Love you too," and then she is there in the doorway, holding the cordless phone out, waiting for him to come take it. She says, "Mom wants to talk to you."

The girl's mother wants to know if everything is all right.

"She's grown up a lot," he says.

"She's not ten anymore," the girl's mother says. "A lot changes in four years."

There is bitterness in her voice. He can hear all the words she is holding back, how she wants to tell him that it's his own damn fault. That he should have made the effort long ago.

He says, "Didn't you pack any winter clothes for her? It ain't even forty out and she's got just a thin little coat on."

"Dammit." He imagines the girl's mother rubbing her forehead with one hand, the way she does. "I let her pack. It's still warm here." When she speaks again, her voice is tired but kind, and he knows that the trace of bitterness he heard before didn't come from her. She says, "I'm sorry. My mind's all over the place. I haven't slept more than four hours at a time all week."

"How's your dad?" he asks.

She sighs. "I can't stand to see him this way."

A floorboard creaks. He freezes and listens for the next unfamiliar sound of someone else in the house. She is back in the den. Examining the books on the shelves. Studying the few photos on the fireplace mantel. He meant to set out the pictures of her, newer school portraits he has stored in a shoebox on the top shelf in the hall closet.

The girl's mother is quiet. Easley tries to think of something to say.

"How's your back these days?" she asks.

A little stiff, he tells her, but fine. She says that's good to hear, and then she tells him she'll call later in the week just to check in. There is a soft click, then silence. But he stands holding the phone to his ear, waiting. As if she will come back on the line to say something else. Something instructional. What it is, exactly, he ought to do.

He fixes a plate for himself and one for the girl, then calls her to dinner. She sits on the other side of the table and looks down at her plate, then up at him.

"Pancakes aren't dinner food."

"Anything's dinner food, long as you eat it for dinner," he says. He pours the syrup, then slides the bottle across the table to her.

"There's not even any vegetables," she says. "You're supposed to have a vegetable."

"I thought you'd like this. I used to make pancakes for you when you was little. Remember?"

"No," she says.

He has waited since the airport to tell her about the trip he's planned. A day-hike up the Resurrection Pass trail, seven miles in, a weekend in a cozy A-frame cabin. He does the hike a couple times every year, him and a couple guys he works with up on the North Slope. He's sure she'll like it. And there will be another little—another girl, he amends, seeing her eyes narrow at the word "little." Another girl, his coworker's daughter. Four days, hiking, playing cards, sitting by the fire.

She says, "Won't it be cold?"

He remembers her gloveless hands, the flimsy sneakers on her feet. It is November. Still autumn back at her mother's house in North Carolina, the leaves on that tree outside the kitchen window lit up red each evening in the sunlight. Jacket weather. But here it is full-on winter. If she'd ever been up to visit before—if he'd had her—she would have known what to expect. Snow, cold, late sunrise, early sunset. Easley chews

and swallows and the pancake sticks in his throat, and he thinks of what he might say to explain how it's been these last lean years. How he's needed time to get back on his feet. She might be happy to know how much it's helped him, to be back someplace where he can feel like himself again. She pushes her food through the pool of syrup on her plate. Sitting with one hand in her lap, her back straight, proper. Like a guest.

"Well," he says. "I guess we ought to run to the store in the morning. Get you geared up. How's that sound?"

They eat. The furnace kicks on. Outside, the wind has picked up and it whistles in the eaves and sends the bare branches of the birch trees scratching at the window panes.

The next morning, they drive into Anchorage to buy fleece pants and gloves and a goose-down coat. He hands her a pair of ankle-high treated leather boots.

"They're too stiff," she says, rotating her foot.

"Any pair you get new is going to be that way. Normally, what we'd do, we'd go on a couple smaller hikes first, get them broken in."

"I don't like them," she says. She takes another pair of boots from the shelf. Purple, with a fuzzy lining at the top. "What about these?"

"Those aren't going to be warm enough."

She puts them on. "They feel good."

"They're not waterproof, either."

"But they're pretty." She says it in a sing-songy way. Like them being pretty trumps everything else.

She stands up and hops. Then she does a little dance in place, swivels the toe of one boot on the floor, shakes her small hips. She twirls, as if modeling a skirt for him. The boots are not leather but some kind of synthetic material, and they will probably give her blisters. Still, the tread doesn't look too bad.

At the checkout, the girl watches the total grow on the register's screen.

"Can you afford all this?" she asks him.

He fumbles with his wallet while the cashier stares at him.

Afterward, they go to Snow City Café. The waiter is dimpled and blue-eyed, and smiles at the girl as she orders cream cheese-stuffed French toast. She closes her menu, hands it to the waiter, and for a moment they are both holding the menu, together.

"And a coffee, too. Thanks, hun," she says. She sounds like the women Easley has overheard in restaurants, at the store. Like women who flirt with him, fishing for his interest.

"You hang out with your friends a lot?" he asks her. "Girl and—boys, and whatnot?"

She shrugs. The coffee comes, and she doctors it with cream and uses four packets of sugar.

He drinks his too fast, burns his mouth. He sits fidgeting with his napkin, shredding it into strips, until the food comes, and then he tucks in like a man starving.

They are seated near the windows, where they can see traffic on Fourth Avenue, spiraling snowflakes lit up in the streetlights. People dash from their cars to their office buildings, sure-footed on the snow and ice, holding their hats to their heads against the cold wind coming in off Cook Inlet. Easley tries not to look at the girl—he has already spent too much of their time together staring—and looks instead at her reflection in the window. She is a dark ghost. Transparent and opaque at the same time. She's watching the road, too, looking at nothing in particular, or maybe taking it all in. Or maybe just thinking her secret thoughts. She twirls a strand of hair absently. Easley remembers an afternoon she came to him in tears, six years old and inconsolable, unable to say what was the matter. The feel of her silky hair under his hand as he held her in his lap. How he worked his fingers through the tangles until her hair was smooth again and she leaned her head on his chest, hiccupping and sighing.

He mops up the last of his egg yolk with a piece of toast, pushes his plate aside, then clears his throat.

"I meant to have you up sooner than this," he says.

She's looking at the menu posted on the wall behind the busy counter where customers sit. Sandwiches, coffees, soup of the day, drinks.

"Your mom and I talked about it," he says. "You know, when would be the best time. For you to visit. Stay a while."

"My grandpa's sick," she says.

"Yeah." Easley puts a hand on the table. "But I'm glad you're here now."

"What if something happens while I'm here?" she asks him.

That won't happen, he should say. But his head rings with the meaning of her words: What if he dies while I'm here with you?

She is quiet for awhile, goes back to studying the menu on the wall. "They have beer here. And wine."

"I guess so."

She says, "Do you come here a lot?"

Easley takes his hand from the table. He waits for her to say more, but she just looks at him, so much like her mother but she has his eyes. She is a disapproving mirror, waiting for what he has to say for himself.

"This ain't my kind of place," he says after a while. "I thought you'd like it."

He looks at his watch.

"Suppose we ought to get going."

She puts on her new coat, and they walk outside into the snow.

He's arranged to meet Pete Travers and Quentin Angasan, and Quentin's little girl, at the Fred Meyer store on Northern Lights Boulevard. When Easley spots them in the produce section, though, it's just the two men by themselves.

Angasan explains that his daughter is home in bed with a fever. "Nothing serious," he says. "But she's not up to a hike. Sorry about that, sweetie," he says to the girl. "Marcie was really looking forward to meeting you."

"This is Pete," Easley says, and the girl shakes Travers's hand. Travers has shaved his beard. Without it, he looks young, a lot younger than twenty-three.

"Those are some fancy boots you got there," he says.

The girl looks down at her own feet, as if she is surprised to discover she's wearing anything on them at all.

They split up to fetch the provisions on their lists. After a glance at Easley, the girl runs after Travers. "Wait up," she says.

"She gonna be okay this weekend?" Angasan asks. "Now it's just her and the three of us?"

Easley watches her disappear down the cereal aisle. "I guess so."

When he's done his shopping and returns to the front of the store, Travers and the girl are already there. The girl has tied her hair back with a piece of scrunched cloth sewn around an elastic band. Travers, standing behind her, pulls the hair tie from her hair, and she whirls around on her heel and exclaims, "Hey!"

"What is this thing, an old sock? Why do you have an old sock in your hair?"

"It's *not*. Give it." She sounds put out, but she is smiling.

They pile into their two trucks, Angasan and Travers in one, Easley and the girl in the other. It is a Friday, nearly noon. Hardly any traffic on the Seward Highway. They follow Angasan out of Anchorage and along Turnagain Arm, and Easley scans the high cliffs to the left of the road. The sharp ridges and rocks are blunted by snow, and the Dall sheep that browse on the grass and sedge in summer months have hidden themselves away for the winter. To the right, Turnagain Arm is gray and calm, the tide is out, exposing the mudflats. Easley wishes for summer, when the belugas swim up the Arm

chasing after salmon and the tourists line up on the road's shoulder to see the whales breach. He wishes he could show her that.

Instead, he finds himself repeating facts he's heard, like a tour guide.

"You know why they call this Turnagain Arm?" he says.

She's got a book open on her lap.

"Because when they came up in their boats, exploring, they got to this water, and they paddled up one side of the Arm. They get to the end, and there's no more water. Just land. So they had to turn again and go back the way they came."

"Who's they?" she says.

"What?"

"Who's *they*? *They* had to turn around and come back."

"The explorers. You know. The men who discovered Alaska."

"Nobody discovered Alaska. It's like the rest of the United States. There were people here already. Then a bunch of white guys show up and act like they discovered it."

Easley adjusts his rearview mirror.

The girl turns a page in her book, lifts it to her face.

"I remember," says Easley, and she lowers her book again and stares at him.

"Couple summers ago. This gray whale got caught in the Arm here when the tide went out. She was with a group of whales, but she got separated from the rest of them and she followed the coast, wandered all the way into the Arm, all the way down near Girdwood. The tide's real swift here. Goes out before you know it. Too fast for her to turn around

and get back to the open ocean. So she got stranded there on the mudflats. It was a sad thing to see, her just lying there in the mud, no water."

"What happened to her?" the girl says.

"She died."

Outside the passenger window, the mudflats are littered with great boulders of ice caked in gray-black silt.

"Why would you tell me that?" says the girl.

They ride in silence. Up ahead, Travers is a silhouette in the passenger seat of Angasan's truck. Easley's radio lasts until the Hope cutoff, and then the station is lost in a cloud of static. He turns it off. Now the only sound is the crackle of the truck's studded tires on the road, the papery shuffle as the girl turns pages, the thrum of Easley's own heart in his ears.

At the Resurrection Pass trailhead Easley wraps the girl's sleeping bag in plastic then straps it to his own pack, then tucks some energy bars into the pocket of her smaller pack and hooks a water bottle to the shoulder strap with a carabiner. The girl sits on the tailgate of Angasan's truck and nods her head as Travers shows her how to tighten the bindings on the snowshoes Angasan has loaned her. She stands and follows Travers, mimicking his wide strides. Easley shoulders his pack. It's Travers who steps on his own shoe and goes tumbling to the ground, not the girl. She offers her hand but when Travers reaches out for it, she snatches it away, laughing. He tosses a handful of snow at her.

Angasan comes over, shaking his head. "Girls and boys," he says.

"Pete's not exactly a boy."

"They're all boys, until they're not," says Angasan. "My oldest boy is about Pete's age. He don't know whether to wipe his ass or wind his watch."

Travers stands and the girl brushes snow from his shoulders. She is glowing. She is having a good time, better than Easley could have hoped for.

"Come on," he says.

They climb the first small hill, Angasan first, then Travers, then the girl. Easley brings up the rear. As on past hikes, there is little talking at first. All around, the trees are covered in hoarfrost. The slender birches bow under the weight of the ice encasing their branches, arcs bent low over the trail, so Easley has to duck under them. It is a rare cloudless winter day. The sun is at its highest point and light glints off the ice hanging in the trees and off the ice on the bridges over the first and second creeks. Easley puts a hand out to steady the girl and says, "Don't slip." Snow crunches under their snowshoes and the rushing sound of the creek is behind them, and then there is only the muted silence of snow all around. It is like cotton in his ears, a not-sound that is nevertheless loud. It fills him up. He exhales, and the condensation of his breath freezes instantly. His beard is white with frozen breath, and the ruff of his hood his white. He is sweating under his layers. He puts one foot forth, pulls the other from the snow, eases into the rhythm, the wide, slow gait, the push and pull of his walking sticks.

A willow ptarmigan calls out. A strange, solitary bark.

He thinks to tell the girl what the sound is. What kind of bird it is that makes it. Her hood is pulled up, and when he calls out to her, she does not hear.

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The Trout Lake cabin smells of wood fires and wet wool socks. They drop their packs inside, peel their hats from their heads, flex their numb fingers inside their gloves. Angasan and Travers go back out immediately to gather wood, while Easley crouches before the stove and uses what is already there to start a fire. When the first small kindling ignites and crackles, the girl comes near and holds her hands out for warmth. Droplets of melted snow cling to her eyelashes and to the ends of her hair. Easley's knees begin to ache from kneeling in front of the stove. He wants to stand and stretch, work out the kinks in his back. The girl is huddled close to him, almost touching, soaking up the warmth of the fire, and he stays where he is. At the airport, waiting for her to come through the terminal exit, he'd planned his greeting, the words he should say, the way he would hug her, how he would enjoy the feel of her in his arms after these long years apart. But when she stood in front of him, finally, taller and thinner, the freckles he remembered now faded, he'd awkwardly raised one hand, as if he expected her to shake it or give him a high five. Instead, he'd grabbed her carry-on bag, then led her to the baggage claim.

There are two bunks in the cabin, a table with benches, and a ladder leading up to a square hole in the ceiling. The girl cranes her head back.

"What's up there?" she says.

"Nothing. Just a loft." Through the window, he sees Travers ambling back with an armload of wood, hat off, brown hair sticking up in whorls, his clean-shaven cheeks

ruddy. "You know," says Easley, "if you wanted some privacy, you could sleep up there."

She peers up into the dark square, and frowns.

When Angasan returns, they set about to making dinner. Easley stands over the stove stirring noodles in a pot. The girl situates herself at Travers's side, and the two of them chop garlic and carrots and peppers, her arm bumping his as she maneuvers her knife. He pokes her with an elbow. "Oh, excuse me," he says. Soon they are jostling each other gently.

Easley thinks of the knives in their hands and says, "Careful."

Travers brings the vegetables over to the pot and dumps them in.

"You got sisters?" Easley asks him.

"Nope," says Travers. He lowers his voice. "Lots of giggly little cousins who love attention, though. You know how girls are."

Easley watches the noodles grow limp in the bubbling sauce.

After dinner they light candles and lanterns and the cabin fills with the shadows of the four of them playing cards. The girl has never played poker before. She counts out her peanuts and cashews before she places them in the middle of the table. In the candlelight, her face looks soft, unblemished. She looks both older and younger than she is. Easley folds his hand and watches her play, the unintentional recklessness of it. She bids, and he glances at her cards. "You sure you want to do that?" he whispers, but she ignores him and pushes all her peanuts into the pot, then cries out when Travers lays down his full house and takes away everything she's bet.

When the sun is long gone and stars pepper the sky, they decide to walk down the short path from the cabin's door to Trout Lake. It is frozen solid. After her first tentative steps, the girl skates across the surface in her boots. The men walk across the lake, and beneath their weight the ice thrums and groans. The girl finds a chunk of hard, crusted snow and gives it a kick. She follows it, catches up to it, maneuvers it between her feet. Head down, concentrating. She slips past the men where they stand.

Angasan and Travers are passing a flask back and forth. When Travers offers it to him, Easley shakes his head.

Even under the layers of coat and sweater and fleece, she is slender and lithe as a sapling. She turns, balletic, and slides across the ice.

"You going to see that girl again while you're in town?" Angasan asks.

"Which one?" Travers says, and Easley can hear the grin in his voice.

"That blonde. The one from the college."

"Oh, her."

"Thought you two were getting serious."

"She thinks so, too," says Travers.

The girl rolls her foot under the ball of ice, tosses it into the air, and kicks it before it lands, fires it into the snow-covered brush edging the lake. She is just an outline in the dark. Maybe a hundred yards away, but it might as well be miles. Light years. The space between them filled with everything he doesn't know.

She turns and waves, and Easley lifts his hand and smiles though he knows his smile won't be seen in the dark. The girl waves again. From the corner of his eye, Easley sees Travers wave back.

When Travers and Angasan head back to the cabin, Easley is sure the girl will follow them. But she stays behind. She glides back and forth on the ice. Slides to a stop and stands nearby. She tilts her head back and so does Easley, and they look at the sky, which is cold and clear, and full of stars. He wishes he knew something about the stars, constellations. It is a clear enough night for the northern lights to come out, and he searches for them, the eerie green glow, the blue vapors, like a ghostly veil across the sky. There is nothing. The girl looks up, and he looks at her, her face, shining in the moonlight, her eyes, also shining, under the stars, the canopy of sky, and all around them is the snow, white and unmarred and reflecting the moonlight.

He reaches out. His hand finds the hair tie holding back the long hair. He tugs it. Her hair cascades across her shoulders, down her back, silky and fine.

She spins around. She says, "*Don't.*"

The next morning, when the sun is finally up, the four of them hike to Juneau Lake. It is a warm morning, already in the upper teens, Easley guesses. He is comfortable without his coat. The air is crisp, but the top layer of snow has softened in the places where the sun shines through the leafless branches. Snow clumps in the cleats of their snowshoes so they have to pause now and then to hit their shoes against tree trunks. Easley falls back with Angasan, though not so far behind he can't hear the

conversation between Travers and the girl, who are ahead of him. They watch their own feet and speak over the wet squelch of snow.

Travers asks if this is her first visit to Alaska, if she likes it so far, if she thinks she'll come back. Easley pushes the hood of his jacket down, away from his ears.

She shrugs and says, "I don't know."

"How come you aren't in school now, anyway?" asks Travers.

"My mom took me out," says the girl. "My granddad's sick. She's got to take care of him all the time. So she sent me here." She falls silent. When she speaks again, her voice is quieter. Easley strains to hear her say, "He was in the hospital, but now he's not. But he's not better, either."

Travers looks at her over a shoulder. "I'm really sorry to hear that."

"I don't know why I couldn't just stay," says the girl.

They stop again to knock the snow off their shoes. Angasan offers Easley a thermos full of hot coffee, and they stand passing it back and forth as Travers and the girl continue down the trail.

"How she doing?" asks Angasan.

"Shit," says Easley. "Bad, I guess. I don't know. She don't say boo to me. What am I supposed to do?"

Angasan shakes his head. "Yeah," he says. "Girls are tough."

Is it so much easier with boys, Easley wonders. It seems to him they are all strangers. They grow strange.

He stumbles over his own shoe, goes down on one knee, and something pops in his back. The old injury, aggravated. He swears, rises slowly. Lets Angasan pass him by. Starts walking, more deliberately now, his mind centered around the twinge in his back.

Up ahead, the girl and Travers have stopped. She wipes a gloved hand across her face. Travers puts his arm around her shoulders, bends near and says something. Then he continues up the trail, following after Angasan. Easley stands alone and watches his girl as she retreats from him. The trees are still and there is no breeze, but a shower of snow falls suddenly from a low-hanging branch and briefly the flakes form a curtain between him and the girl. Though it is warm out and he is standing in a patch of sunlight, he feels a chill in his bones. His back hurts. At once the hike is no longer fun. He considers letting the others go on without him, considers returning to the cabin on his own. But the girl is already around the next bend, out of sight. He can't go back.

He spends the afternoon laid out on his bunk, his back fine unless he moves. Angasan offers him pain medication, tells him these pills will work better than the aspirin Easley takes every two hours. Easley turns him down three times before snapping, "I can't take the strong stuff."

The others come in and out of the cabin, gather wood, shed coats and sweaters then pull them back on as the sun goes down and the evening grows colder. Just before dinner, Angasan and Travers stand outside the cabin, taking turns sawing logs down to stove-sized pieces. He can hear their muffled voices. The girl comes inside. She stops

in the doorway, as if she has forgotten he would be there, then she crosses the room to the stove and warms herself.

"Cold out, huh?" he says, then wishes he hadn't. He can't see her from where he's lying, he is facing the doorway and she is behind him at the stove, but he knows she is rolling her eyes.

He clears his throat. He stares at his own feet and says, "Listen. If you want to talk—"

"I don't," she says.

I wanted you, he should say. Even though I did everything to show you the opposite.

"I just want to tell you," he says, "that you can talk to me."

"What, are we best friends all of a sudden?"

The hinges on the woodstove whine and there is the sound of her stuffing a log into the stove and then closing the door.

Easley cannot stand to be indoors any longer and so after dinner he shoves his feet into his boots and takes two more aspirin and walks down the trail to the lake, then crosses the lake into the trees. He feels his back as he walks, the old pain, the regret. He lowers himself onto a fallen log. It is not as he'd hoped—that the walk would take his mind off things. The night is cloudless once more and the moon shines upon him. He can see the trees and low brush. How their angles are softened with accumulated snow. There has been so much snow this year, it has changed the shape of things overnight.

He sits alone, wishing the pain away. It does not go, and so he rises and walks slowly back toward the cabin.

Near the lake, caught in a tangle of head-high bushes, he hears the girl's voice, then Travers's. Easley pauses. He can see them through the bushes, the two of them standing on the frozen lake together. The girl skating around Travers. Easley knows that what she will remember from this trip is this young man who makes her laugh and knows the right things to say. When she returns to her mother's house and is asked about her visit, she will barely mention her father. But she laughs, and the sound carries through the dark, full of joy, and Easley feels an unexpected contentment settle over him like a warm mist.

The girl slides into Travers, who catches her then lets go. Their voices are low, too low for Easley to hear, but he can see the way the girl takes Travers's sleeve in her hand, the way she draws close. The way Travers shakes his head. The girl is tall, taller than Easley had realized until seeing her here, standing next to Travers. The top of her head comes to just under his chin. There is no space between them. It is the briefest kiss, and when it is over Travers steps away from her. Slides away from her on the ice, hands in his pockets. He shakes his head. He says, loud enough for Easley to hear, "You shouldn't have done that."

"But you like me, don't you?" the girl says.

Travers says, "No."

All the chill of the night is in that word. Neither of them move, but Easley sees the way the girl's body stiffens, as if to withstand a sudden wind.

With a snapping of twigs, Easley comes through the bushes and onto the ice. He crosses without slipping, forgets the pain in his troublesome back, crosses the ice so quickly Travers's hands are still in his pockets when Easley takes him by the coat. Easley's momentum carries both of them the rest of the way across the ice, until he has Travers backed up against a snow bank.

"What the hell—" says Travers.

"I could ask the same question," Easley growls, his face in the young man's face, their noses almost touching.

"I didn't do anything." Travers squirms in Easley's grip. "She was the one who—  
*I told* her—I tried to tell her earlier, I couldn't—"

"What are you doing out here alone to begin with?"

"Nothing. I just thought—"

Easley tightens his grip on Travers's coat, pulls Travers close, then shoves him against the snow bank again. He feels a hot coal tumbling inside of himself, a smoldering that feels like anger, like hurt. Like embarrassment. He looks away from Travers, but the girl is gone.

"She's a kid, Martin," says Travers. "I know that."

Easley lets go of his coat. He stares at the young man, the mussed hair, the confused blue eyes. His gloved hand smashes Travers's mouth, and Travers falls away from him with a hand cupping the blood that comes.

He leaves Travers on the lake. He follows his daughter's footprints up the trail back to the cabin, but when he goes inside, she is nowhere to be seen.

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They call her name in the darkness. He and Angasan, who did not see her come back because he was off in the bushes behind the cabin. When Travers finally wanders up from the lake, he asks no questions, just joins them, and the three men circle the cabin, calling. She has no flashlight, does not know her way. Easley wonders if she is still scared of the dark, the way she was at eight years old, and he regrets every time he ever told her *big girls don't need a nightlight* and closed her bedroom door behind him.

Rachel. Come back. Rachel.

When he finds himself back at the cabin, Angasan is already there, smiling. He says nothing, but gestures at Easley, and the two of them go inside. Angasan puts a finger to his lips, then points up. Up, at the ladder leading to the loft, at the dark square in the ceiling, at the flickering light of a candle above.

In the morning, the girl will not come down. Angasan drops Ziplock bags of frozen eggs and vegetables into a pot of boiling water, then divvies up the campfire omelets among the three plates set out on the table.

"She's not having breakfast?" he asks.

Easley shakes his head.

Angasan pours the coffee, and the three men sit at the table. Travers forks his food into his mouth, barely finishing one bite before shoveling the next one in, wincing as he chews. His upper lip is swollen. Easley watches the top of his head, the way he is hunched over the plate, finishing as fast as he can. He's not a bad kid, really. In the wan

light of the new morning, Easley can see that. But he feels the same smoldering heat inside himself every time he looks at Travers. The way the girl's body stiffened. The stricken look on her face.

Travers and Angasan finish breakfast. They stand and pull on their coats and head outside.

When the door is closed and their voices have faded down the trail, Easley rises and climbs the ladder to the loft. "You decent?" he says before poking his head through the opening.

She doesn't reply.

She is sitting in the dark, already bundled in her coat and scarf and gloves. Or maybe she never took them off the night before, just dragged her sleeping bag up the ladder and laid on top of it, still fully clothed, boots and all. She's tucked her hair up under her hat.

"Morning," says Easley, still standing on the ladder.

She mumbles something, staring at her own hands. Then she looks up at him, as if he has cleared his throat. As if he is about to proclaim something.

He has seen the impossibly tall, slender towers of snow balanced along tree branches on windless winter days. He knows how, with the slightest breath, with the wrong touch, they crumble and fall.

He says, "Get your stuff packed up, kiddo."

"We're going?"

"Is that what you want to do?"

She nods.

"Okay, then."

He has packed his gear and is tightening the straps on his pack when Travers and Angasan return.

"You leaving?" Angasan says.

Travers moves to the table, begins to clear the plates and empty coffee mugs. He doesn't look up when the girl descends from the loft.

"My back can't take another night on these bunks," says Easley. "I need a hot shower and a decent bed."

Angasan nods. He puts out his hand for the girl to shake, and says, "Next time, Marcie'll come along, I promise. Hope you had fun, though."

She shakes his hand. Travers turns around and starts to say something, but the girl is already out the door.

He lets her lead the way back. Her feet have grown confident in the snowshoes, and she tears down the trail, aided by the downhill grade. Easley is slowed by the lingering pain in his back. When he calls out to her that they should rest a moment, she doesn't hear, continues on. He stops, takes a pull from his water bottle, watches her retreat. He cannot help but marvel at the efficiency of her limbs, the intelligence of her body, the way it has mastered the awkwardness of the wide shoes strapped to her feet. All in two short days.

About two miles from the truck, she finally stops. She sags against a fallen tree, red-faced. The ends of her hair peeking out from her cap are stiff and frozen. She is bundled by all her layers of coat and sweater and shirt, just a kid in winter clothes, runny-nosed and mitten, clad in purple boots with soggy trim. Even if they turned back now and trekked the five miles to the cabin, even if he made her hot cocoa and sat her down next to Travers, let the two of them talk around what had happened until they reached some kind of understanding—it wouldn't be the same as taking it back. That's something he can't make happen. Irrevocable. That's the word. For when something's done and can't be undone. For when something's lost, and can't ever be recovered.

"Come on," says Easley. "We're almost there."

It starts to snow on the drive back. The flakes fall in thick curtains, each flake as big as a girl's hand. Easley has never seen flakes so large. They light upon the windshield and melt away instantly, one second there, then gone, before the wipers can even touch them.

On the ride home, Easley says three things.

First, "Are you warm enough?"

Then, later, "He's not mad at you."

Then, "I'm not mad at you, either."

Snow flakes dance in the columns of light made by the truck's headlights. Easley lets up on the gas and they crawl along, the only vehicle on the road for miles, the only two people for miles. When they reach Turnagain Arm, he thinks again of the gray whale

that wandered up the coast and became stranded. There is another story he could tell her. How he stood at Beluga Point one summer day and watched a pod of whales swim in with the tide; how, later, he saw them swim out again, their sleek backs rising above the surface of the water as they headed into the open ocean. There is a lesson here, he could tell her.

But she is curled up on the other end of the bench seat, tucked into a tight ball, her knees drawn up, her forehead pressed against the passenger window. He tries to see from her reflection if she is asleep. Perhaps it's the thickness of the glass, or the quality of the darkness outside, but the girl is reflected in the window more than once. Her face is doubled, trebled, one reflection laid on top of another, an effect that makes it difficult for him to see her clearly. He says her name, and she does not respond, and so he turns up the heat and looks out at the road ahead, at the snow falling so thickly across the two beams of his headlights that he cannot see anything in front of him, cannot see anything coming.