

DASHIELL, REBECCA, M.F.A. Underway. (2013)  
Directed by Professor Michael Parker. 75 pp.

The four stories in this manuscript explore the complexities of relationships and family dynamics. The first story, "When Not Moored, at Anchor, or Aground," follows a girl who must deal with the knowledge of having witnessed an act that threatens her family. The second story, "Broken, Together" centers around a man recovering from a bicycle accident, who in the aftermath, tries to forge connections with both his estranged son and the woman who hit him. In the third story, "Forecasting," a wounded bear looms outside in the woods, while a woman considers her son and ex-husband, who have left her alone and vulnerable. The final story, "Going Home With," is concerned with a young woman who is able to recognize how others deceive themselves in their relationships but cannot see the ways in which she is doing the same. In each of these stories, characters find themselves unable to communicate meaningfully, or even at all, which leads to the idea that human beings are continuously in process and navigating the intricacies of interaction.

UNDERWAY

by

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A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro  
2013

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## WHEN NOT MOORED, AT ANCHOR, OR AGROUND

I wasn't supposed to come in the front door when my father had his friends over. He would turn on the lamp with the blue shade in the living room window and this was how I was to know. He would be especially distressed to see that I'd been down by the bay, legs dangled in the cool water, traces of mud snaking along my calves. I knew I should have entered through the back, but since I'd walked in on my mother and Wade Garrettson in the kitchen two weeks ago, I'd been testing things. I hadn't known what to do with this knowledge, whether I should tell my father. I'd seen him get angry before, but at nothing so big as this. So I hadn't said anything, not yet, but instead filtered my knowledge into small rebellions, such as coming in the wrong door or watching television after dinner or forgetting to pick up tomatoes on the way home from school.

My father was sitting across from the door, and when I entered through the front, his eyes narrowed. Three of his friends—all watermen too, Wade Garrettson among them—sat in high-backed dining room chairs in a semi-circle around him. It always seemed to me he never wanted them to be too comfortable, at least not as comfortable as he was. My stomach balled up for a moment, and then my father let his eyes relax and broke into a smile.

“Carrie, thank god,” my father said. “We’ve just run out of cigarettes.”

The smoke in that room made my eyes water, and I didn't like the way Wade Garrettson was looking at me, feeling me out, pleading-like. The other men—captains all,

like my father, except for Wade—turned back to my father, back to whatever joke they were telling, but Wade was still watching me.

I left the living room and walked past the kitchen, where my mother slammed pots and pans without making any noise. No amount of coaxing would get her out of that kitchen while my father's friends were over. She hadn't talked to me about what I'd seen, acting as though it had never happened at all, save for that one look she gave me when she'd pushed Wade away from her. *Please*. I'd come home earlier than usual that afternoon, and there hadn't been any lights on in the front room, which meant my father wasn't there. I opened the kitchen door, and there was my mother, pressed up against the cold stove, Wade Garrettson's head in the crook of her neck and his hands on her breasts. My mother didn't say anything, just pushed Wade away, gently though. Wade didn't look at me then. Just grabbed his cap and left. And Mother turned around and started the stove—the flame burning blue to orange.

I found the roll of bills on my father's dresser and thought, as I often did, of stuffing a few in my pocket for later. But he counted that roll every night before he could fall asleep, and kept a running tally in his head of what was left against what my mother would want for groceries and bills and when the next roll would be coming in. There was talk of overfishing, and there were rules—Father said it seemed like new ones every week—about how many of each kind you were allowed to catch. Every fish then had to be reported, *every fish*. He knew they were out there, waiting for him in the water, but he couldn't get to them. And by the time he paid for all the licenses and his crew and the

docking fees and upkeep for his workboat *Magnolia*, he sometimes had nothing left for himself.

I left through the kitchen door this time. My mother kept her back to me as she stirred something pink at the stove. All that cigarette smoke trapped in the house made my little sister, Ella, cough, so she was outside on our small patch of backyard with her plastic horse and her one Barbie. The Barbie was some kind of beachgoer, with a purple sequined swimsuit, but Ella had fashioned a riding outfit out of my father's old socks and a tie he'd spilled red wine on. It had been a huge catastrophe, because it was a Saturday night when he spilled that wine, and he only had the one tie. I hopped over Ella's toys, gave her a pat on the head, and she looked up at me with her mouth wide open. She lost one of her front teeth just last week; rather than a dollar under her pillow, the tooth fairy left her an apple with a spot on it. Mother cut out the spot and sliced it over the morning oatmeal.

Outside, the air was easier to breath, that fall smell of dying leaves and fires in chimneys that had been closed up all summer starting to settle in. I felt lighter, knowing I had a full fifteen minutes before I had to worry about heading home again, and make that decision about which door to use.

I walked past the schoolhouse and the grassy field on the corner where we would sometimes play soccer, and there was Charlie McGibbon, dribbling all by himself. I put my head down and walked faster; there was no other way to get to the store quickly and I knew even now my father would be checking his watch, but it was no use because Charlie saw me and yelled my name.

I didn't know a single person who would stop walking for Charlie McGibbon. But since there was no one else around, I did. He'd moved here last year, but his family wasn't from here, which was his first mistake. And he'd wanted so badly to fit in, that was the other. It's as if we could smell the desperate longing and took power in denying it.

After he yelled at me to hold up, he bent down to grab his ball and tripped and fell on his face. I was thankful that no one else was around to see it. But he was quickly back on his feet and running toward me. He had dirt on his nose—I thought there might some blood there too—but I didn't say anything.

“Hiya, Carrie.”

“Hi.”

He smiled, his teeth so big they surprised me every time, and I was left wondering how he ever closed his mouth at all. A thin line of acne spread across his forehead, which was shiny with either sweat or oil. We shared the same birthday, which had seemed to indicate to him we would be fast friends. We'd both turned thirteen over the summer, and I was thankful we were out of school when that happened.

I looked down at him—I was at least a head taller—and couldn't help but sigh. I knew there was no way I could get to the market without his company, and when I started walking, he stepped in line, having to jog to keep up.

“Where are we going?”

I told him I was running errands and couldn't be out long, but he started going on and on about the soccer game next Tuesday after school. It was just a pick-up game, but

the ritual was so formalized, we already knew who the team captains would be and who they would pick for their teams and exactly in what order they would pick them. Charlie was leagues better than some of the others, but he was always picked last. He was always so cheerful about it too, as if maybe next time he might be picked earlier; if he scored enough goals, we'd warm to him. Maybe if he sulked, we'd see he was like us.

I didn't understand Charlie's interest in these soccer games, except that perhaps his interest was tied to mine—an intense desire to be anywhere but home. I'd been feeling it lately, with my father always worried about his boat and money and my mother retreating further into herself every day, and now that I'd seen her with Wade, my stomach knotted up every time I turned the corner toward my house, my fingers lingered on the doorknob before turning. And Charlie had it bad too, maybe even worse. He lived on the street over from mine, and sometimes I cut through his yard on my way home from school. His father was the biology teacher at the high school and his mother stayed home, but there was something so formidable in her that even Charlie's father seemed to get smaller as he walked home. His shoulders would start to sag, and he'd bend his neck and take a deep breath before opening the front door. Charlie did the same thing. I never saw his mother anything but smiling, but there was a tightness around her lips that I noticed only because I'd seen that same tightness in my mother. But I had a feeling that whereas my mother kept that tightness inside, Charlie's mother unleashed it all as soon as the door was closed behind her husband or son.

We got to the corner market and I went for the Pall Malls, while Charlie hung back and looked at the comics. I thought about buying some bubble gum, but either

Mitch, the clerk, would tell my father or else he'd know when I gave him the change. My father didn't pay attention to anything the way he did his change. Mitch looked around to make sure no one was watching as he traded my money for the cigarettes and put them in a bag for me. Charlie bought some gum and offered me a piece. I took it, without saying thank you, and we parted, each to our own miseries, for it was almost suppertime.

When I got home, the other men were gone, though the empty whiskey bottle was still on the floor next to my father's chair. My parents' bedroom door was closed, and I quietly set down the cigarettes and the change outside their door. I heard a muffled sighing and rustling and a hushed "please, please, please" before I could back away. I went into the kitchen and turned off the burner under the soup, boiling over and pink because my mother had tied the herb bouquet with red string.

On Tuesday, we played soccer. Charlie and I ended up on the same team, as we always did, and we lost, as we usually did. We didn't talk much, although Charlie did pass me the ball once.

Afterwards, it was still an hour or so before I had to be home for supper, so I walked down to the docks. I figured I'd kill some time there, maybe lie down in the hull of my father's deadrise, think of being out on the open water, the V of the hull gently bobbing. No fishing nets or lines, just sun and salt and my father like he seemed to me when I was little. He'd point out the gulls and the crabs and the pilings sticking straight out of the water—groupings of wood and metal—round past Messick Point where the old commercial fishing piers used to be.

Summers had been spent on the water. My father didn't talk much; what he had to say was usually about fish or the workings of the boat or the tides, but I somehow knew what it meant that my father shared these things with me. And when I asked him questions about *Magnolia* or currents, he would stop what he was doing and look at me as he answered. It seemed to make him happy when I took an interest.

Last summer, right before I turned twelve, though, there was a shift. My father started leaving in the mornings without waking me. My mother would tiptoe into my room, open the curtains. "It's a new morning," she would say. She had never done this before. All summer, she tried to keep me occupied with Ella and in helping around the house—she said it was time I learned my way around the kitchen. She tried to get me to read books and then talk about them with her. I never did finish *Jane Eyre*, and she seemed to hold this against me. It felt as though I was passed from my father to my mother, and it was never clear to me why or who it was that had wanted it.

As I neared the marina, Charlie caught up with me. I didn't know how long he'd been following me, whether slow and methodical or the kind of sprint that followed a quick decision.

"I don't much want to go home," he said. He wasn't breathing too hard. "Can I come with you?" There were gulls lined up on the fence, a bird on each post except for one that was vacant. I nodded. It started to mist, but the specks of cool water felt good on my skin, hot after running up and down the field. Charlie tilted his face toward the sky as we walked.

"You cut through my yard sometimes."

“Sometimes.”

“My mom calls you ‘that Carrie-girl.’ I tell her you’re just ‘Carrie.’”

“Oh,” I said. “Thanks.”

Charlie and I hopped the fence to the marina so we wouldn’t have to go the long way round. It was nearing six and most everyone was home or on their way there, having started the day before the sun even thought to show itself. Charlie’s eyes were big as he took in the boats.

We walked out onto the pier—Charlie staying close to the middle— and we passed Wade Garrettson mopping the deck of a ship called *Lucille*. He did odd jobs, took work where he could get it. Sometimes, my father hired him. He stopped and leaned on his mop when he saw me.

“Carrie,” he said, nodding his head. His eyes were watery and he looked like he might want to say something more, but I didn’t give him the chance. I just kept on walking. He didn’t call out.

Charlie asked me who that man was and I told him it didn’t matter, and that shut him up, though maybe only because we came to *Magnolia*, docked at the end of the pier. It had taken my father nearly my whole life to get that spot of the end of the dock. Charlie followed me over the rail and when I lay down on the deck, he did too. We stretched out side by side and it stopped sprinkling but the clouds still covered the sky.

Charlie and I parted ways back by the soccer field. There was a new look he gave me, which made me nervous. But also not so nervous. When I got home, my mother was

sitting at the table, her head in her hands. Loud laughter erupted from the other room. She looked up and smiled weakly.

“They’ll want coffee,” she said as she pushed her chair back—a long scrape across the linoleum—and stood up. I watched her prepare the coffee, pausing to take in its scent. Her hair was just starting to gray, but you couldn’t really notice it unless you were up close. Her apron hugged her slim waist—my father took pride in this, I knew, from the way he talked about it. Her hand shook a little as she scooped the coffee into the pot. I had resented staying home with her the first summer, but this past summer we’d found a kind of rhythm. Once I finished my chores, she mostly just let me be until 2 o’clock when we’d sit down at the kitchen table and share a pot of tea. Ella would be out playing and Father wouldn’t be home yet, and Mother would smoke her one cigarette for the day and close her eyes. The teapot was chipped at the spout—it had been her mother’s—and I would stare at the chip and think about how one day the teapot might be mine. To think of myself all grown up.

While the coffee brewed, Mother chopped an onion in chunks that never would cook evenly, and I pulled down the tray and the nice coffee cups. Mother helped me fill them but that’s as far as she went; I had to carry the tray out to the living room. The men went silent when I entered, probably in the middle of some dirty joke. I was aware of Wade in the corner, but I kept my back to him the whole time.

“Thank your mother for us,” my father said. I took the tray back to the kitchen, where Mother was rubbing a chicken with butter, her fingers greasy with the fat. I saw a bit of butter smeared on her wedding ring, but I didn’t say anything.

An hour later, when we finally sat down to dinner, the chicken was tough, the potatoes lumpy, and my father told us that a storm was supposed to be coming in over the weekend, and how right before, the fish would practically be ready to jump into his boat. He said Wade said so, and Wade always seemed to predict the fishing season.

Mother was cutting up Ella's chicken but paused for just a moment when Father mentioned Wade. She looked at the fork and knife in her hand as if she'd forgotten why they were there and what it was she was supposed to be doing with them. Father didn't notice and Mother started sawing at the chicken again and Father kept talking about those fish, just jumping out of the water, saying please catch me, take me home, exchange me for money, feed your family. If only he could take them all in, those fish so willing and ready that he could touch but couldn't have. And Mother wouldn't even look up. Father kept talking, waiting for her encouragement, but she said nothing.

At the end of the week, Charlie stood a little too close to me when we were picking teams for soccer, and some of the boys noticed.

"Carrie, want me to pick your boyfriend?" a boy named Sam Weathers asked.

"Shut up," Charlie yelled. I shot him a look that said, no you shut up. Not here. But Sam wouldn't let it alone.

"Well, I better put you on the same team, couldn't break up the love birds."

Charlie's face was getting red, but he didn't look altogether displeased. During the game, he kept looking at me to pass the ball but I wouldn't look back at him. He yelled my name when I was open and Sam and all the others started yelling my name too, in

high-pitched imitations of Charlie's voice. He got red again, this time angry, and starting yelling at them to stop. There was only one way to end this. He got the ball again, and despite the fact that he was on my team, I ran into him, full speed, my arms crossed over my body, and he went down. Had trouble catching his breath even. He didn't look at me for the rest of the game, or after either. I walked home slowly, dragging my feet like I'd always been told not to, but Charlie never did catch up.

When I got home, my parents' bedroom door was closed. As I was about to knock, I heard a sound I had trouble placing. My father, crying. My mother's voice then too, lower even, soothing, muffled. My father, *He'll tell everyone. Think how it looks.* My mother said something else. My father, *I can't.* After I'd walked in on my mother with Wade Garrettson, she told me to go pick up Ella and get some onions on the way home. I was still standing in the doorway, my hand on the knob, the leaves-and-smoke October air rushing past. My mother's hair was halfway out of her bun, the brown frizz standing out against the pale blue cabinets. We would never talk about this moment. Even after everything else, it never came back to this. And now, my father knew. I thought if he knew, he would fix it. I'd been scared to tell him, I didn't know how angry he'd be. But I knew he'd take care of Wade. But this—this crying—was worse than anything he could have yelled or thrown against a wall. He wasn't going to do a thing about it.

An hour later, we were all seated at the dinner table, sipping our watery soup. Ella was going on and on about some craft project at school, and I watched how my parents looked at each other. My mother, through her eyelashes, a quick glance every third

spoonful. My father, less often, through the bottom of the beer bottle as he took a swig.

He knew. How long had he known?

I pushed my chair away from the table, steam still wafting off the surface of my soup.

“I’m not hungry,” I said as I stood up.

“Sit down,” my father said. “Your mother’s prepared this meal. And you’ll eat it.”

“I don’t want it.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. I stood there, staring down my father. This was a new experience for him. For me as well. “Sit. Down.”

“It’s fine,” my mother said. We all looked at her. The only time she ever disagreed with him was when they thought no one was listening. Ella’s spoon was caught midway between her bowl and mouth, drops of bright green staining the white linen.

“She’s had enough.”

I didn’t know whether I could move or not. My father stared at me for a few more moments, and then looked down at his soup. His spoon went back and forth between his bowl and mouth—I couldn’t stop watching the spoon—the metal and the ceramic meeting with a gentle knock. He kept his eyes on his soup, and I backed away from the table and went to my room, closing the door quietly behind.

Father seemed in a good mood on Saturday afternoon, when he came in ahead of the storm, told us he’d made a good haul, just like Wayne had said. After lunch, when he and Mother were closed behind their bedroom door, I stood outside wondering if I would

hear him cry again. But instead, I heard a slap, followed by an “Oh.” I left the house quickly, knowing without really knowing that I was heading for the docks.

I thought I could be alone, just for once, but as I ran past the soccer field, there was Charlie. He had a ball with him and had been practicing. His cheeks were red and it had just started to rain.

“Who are you, anyway?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

He dropped the ball.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

He kicked the ball at me—hard—and little bits of mud sprinkled my blue jeans, but it missed. We stood there, staring at each other as the rain steadied. A blow of wind pushed the ball out onto the street, but there were no cars around. I picked up the ball and threw it to him, and then I kept walking toward the water. A few moments later, I heard him behind me.

“It’s going to rain harder,” he said.

“I know.”

“It’s going to storm.”

“I know.”

“Our parents will want us home.”

“That’s the last place I’d head to,” I said, not looking at him. He kept pace beside me for a while. He let go of the soccer ball, and we watched the wind carry it across the street, into a ditch.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

By the time we got to the docks, the wind was really picking up, the workboats pumping up and down in the surf. No one seemed to be around, having gotten in the day’s work early and off to home or the pub to ride out the storm. *Magnolia* was docked at the very end, a coveted spot when the weather was fine, but now it seemed to bear the brunt of the rising waves. Charlie and I jumped into the boat, and I started untying the lines, and when I asked Charlie to help, I could tell he was nervous by the way his hands were shaking.

When we were nearly done, Charlie grabbed my shoulder and pointed behind me. Wade was running down the pier, waving one arm, the other arm shielding his face from the rain. I shook my head at Charlie—we weren’t going to wait and see what it was he wanted to say.

In the cabin we could at least keep the rain off of our faces, though we were already soaked through. I started the motor, and Charlie placed his hands over mine: are you sure? I pushed his hands away—gently—and steered the boat away from the dock. I looked behind me; Wade was at the end of the pier, and I watched as he became smaller and smaller, so that I’d never even know it was him. Only a few minutes in the water, and Charlie was already leaning sick over a bucket, not used to waves like this. The waves were heavy, but I wasn’t scared. Father had taken Ella and me out once and a storm came up—one worse than this, but Father never panicked, and I never thought to be afraid. The motion of the waves turned Ella’s stomach. And there was this awful moment where she

was sucking in air and vomiting at the same time and I'd been sure she would choke.

Father had never taken Ella on his boat again.

Charlie wiped his mouth with his sleeve and came over to brace himself next to me.

"Where are we heading?" he asked.

It was a good question.

"The inlet up by Messick Point," I said. It seemed to me we might be protected there. Charlie nodded, and I steered us southeast. The clouds were dark gray, blocking out the sun. I looked over at Charlie and he gave me a weak smile right before he leaned over the bucket and vomited again.

"I tend to get a little seasick," he yelled, over the rain.

We rode out the storm in the inlet and watched the moon break through the clouds. The winds didn't last long, though the rain continued for some time. Charlie fell asleep for a few hours, and I guess I did too, because when I woke up his arm was next to mine and his breath coming in close to my ear.

I nudged him awake, and he asked me what time I thought it might be.

"After midnight," I said, which I guessed by the place of the moon in the sky.

"Oh." He looked around, as if for somebody. "Shouldn't we get home?"

I didn't say anything. I wanted to stay out here forever.

"Carrie? Our parents. They'll be worried."

"If they even know we're gone."

“They’ll know. Come on,” he said, putting his arm around me. I didn’t pull away. “Let’s go.”

I could have argued with him, told him how going home wouldn’t make things better, how if we just left ourselves drift, maybe we would be happier. Probably I didn’t, because I knew he would insist on heading back anyway. He would insist on being cheerful, on hoping that whatever our lives were like now, they wouldn’t always be like this.

Charlie stood next to me in the cabin as I guided us home, the motor causing little ripples in the surf behind us. The air like it always is after it rains—perfectly clean.

I was coming around Messick Point at three-quarter speed, using the moonlight to guide me, and I spotted the pilings my father had pointed out to me before, leftover from the pier where they used to clean the fish. They were sticking about six inches out of the water, enforced metal rods you might miss if you didn’t know they were there. A dock might be swept away by the angry water, but the pilings wouldn’t budge.

*Magnolia* meant everything—to my father, to my family, to how we lived. I thought of this as I steered us straight, as we came up on the pilings, and I felt their metal ripping into the bottom of the boat, tugging us backward as the engine tried to push us ahead, felt the boat open loose and water start to find its way in.

And the strange thing was, it was all so peaceful. Swirling water, my ankles cold, Charlie screaming, me not hearing his words. Cold, water, feeling its way up my legs. Charlie’s hand—hard grip on my arm—but I wanted to feel the cold.

Charlie pulling me out of the cabin and toward the side, water reaching our knees, creeping up, spilling over my boots and in around my toes. Me thinking, Charlie is stronger than he looks. Later, I remembered his words coming in fragments: “not your fault,” “didn’t see,” “now,” “go.” All these over and over, as if saying them would make them true.

## BROKEN, TOGETHER

Four months after the cyclist came speeding down that hill and collided with Ted—who wasn't in a crosswalk, if he was being honest about it—Ted was walking again, though with a slight limp that was worse in the mornings. He'd lost his job three weeks before the accident and was on his way to an interview when it happened. He'd lost his savings, too, what meager pile there'd been. He'd signed the papers the cyclist's lawyers had brought him in the hospital—his son, Jack, was still mad about that, he seemed to think Ted could have gotten more. Maybe he could have. The lawyers made it seem like this was the best it was going to get for Ted, that they had his best interests at heart. Jack told him he should really watch more TV.

The settlement Ted did get had all gone toward the medical bills, and he was currently sleeping on an air mattress in the empty bedroom his son's roommate had vacated a few months back. The hospital bills found him even there. He would open them, chuckle for a few moments, then lay down on his stomach and press his face into the carpet—this usually stopped him from crying until he could calm down and stuff the bills under the mattress.

He'd been at Jack's for three months, and every Monday he woke when Jack woke. This morning, it was at six a.m. when he heard Jack getting dressed in the next room. He heard a few beer bottles tip over too. Jack had turned twenty-one while Ted was in the hospital—he still meant to get him a gift of some kind, but nothing alcohol-

related as heavy drinking didn't seem to be new to his son. Nor was the notion of needle to skin, as new details emerged from the tattoos on Jack's torso every time he walked around without a shirt—intricate weavings of women and snakes and water. Sometimes, Ted just wanted to stare, or to ask, what does that one mean? Is she a woman you know, the one with the yellow hair? It looks like she's drowning. But Jack never stayed still for that long. He lived just a few blocks back from the beach in Half Moon Bay and spent his weekends surfing, about the only activity he participated in of which Ted approved. The apartment he rented was crowded into an L-shaped lot, and the salt from the ocean peeled away the paint from the building in long, ragged strips. But rent was cheaper than in the city. And the water was right there.

Jack worked for a company that performed maintenance and landscaping for Pacific Gas & Electric, so he spent most of the week traveling around the state to sites, staying in hotels and drinking beer and going to late night showings at the local movie theater with the other workers. Every Monday when Jack left for the week, he would hand Ted an envelope with three twenty-dollar bills.

"To get you through the week," he'd say to Ted. They always went through the same motions—Ted wouldn't take the envelope at first.

"I'll be fine," he'd say, but Jack would press it into his hands, avoiding eye contact.

"It's not much," he would say, though Ted never would spend it all, made it a point to leave next to Jack's bed whatever was leftover after a week of value meals and noodles.

This Monday, Ted rolled off the air mattress onto the floor; it was easier to push himself off the carpet than the give of the mattress. Jack was in the kitchen drinking a V-8 and scratching the side of his stomach, the site of his newest tattoo—a mermaid with vampire fangs, emblazoned on an anchor—which Ted thought looked a little redder than it should, but wouldn't ever say it.

“Mornin’,” he said to his son, receiving only a grunt in return. He saw Jack’s duffel beside the front door. “Gone all week?” he asked. Jack nodded. “All right then, don’t forget your toothbrush.” Ted always wanted to say something more to his son, play the role of father, but he’d moved out when Jack was six and was so out of practice, it felt like they might never recover. He’d married young to a woman even younger—who had looked up to him at the time because at 25, certainly he knew a thing or two. But he was a disappointment—he never made enough money, he never asked her questions about herself or what it was she wanted. She told him the biggest thing he ever did was leave. Ted continued to be involved in Jack’s life, but only marginally, sometimes not even one weekend a month like the agreement said. Once, when Jack was in middle school, he got into a fight in the cafeteria, and his mother couldn’t leave work so Ted had been the one to go pick him up. He hadn’t seen his son in over two months. The two of them sat across from the principal, a man with giant arms that seemed ready to burst from his sports jacket. Jack with his arms crossed and Ted running his hands up and down the tops of his jeans. He’d had to leave the job site and his clothes were lightly dusted in dirt. Jack silent as the principal outlined his sins—giving some kid named Tom a busted lip, inciting violence, lack of school spirit—but once they were out in the car, Jack started crying

violently. Ted had never seen him do this before. Jack managed to choke out, “It wasn’t my fault” between hiccups and deep intakes of breath and snot running from his nose, until he bent over with his head in his hands. Ted thought there were probably right words to say in that moment, but he didn’t know what they were. Instead, he placed his hand on the small of Jack’s back and kept it there until he stopped crying.

It wasn’t until Ted found the envelope of money next to his favorite cereal that he realized Jack hadn’t handed it to him this week. Ted picked up the envelope and ran his fingers along the sealed seam, wondering what this meant.

In the afternoons, Ted went to the library. He was supposed to be looking for a job, but he spent most of his time searching the internet for news of Claudia Selner. The name from the court papers. The woman riding the bike. The woman who’d sent her lawyers into his hospital room when one of his eyes was still swollen shut. It was during one of his first visits to the library that he found himself typing her name, and it felt like that was what he was supposed to have been doing all along. He’d found bits and pieces: a wedding announcement from nine years ago, a picture from a community theater production of *The Music Man* (though the picture was so small he couldn’t pick her out), an article about the farm out near Moss Beach where she lived and housed a rescue center for pit bulls and mixes. He’d gone over and over these pieces, searching for clues, but they never led him anywhere except to conclude that she was a woman and this thing had happened to her that had also happened to him and nobody else could possibly understand.

When he typed in her name today, though, there was a new article in the living section of the *Chronicle*. It was a follow-up piece about her farm and referenced a bicycle accident. You were supposed to feel sorry for her—she was in danger of losing her farm after some massive hospital bills. The article didn't mention a husband, and there was a photo of Claudia alone, but she was smiling so widely, Ted thought it might be from before the accident. He couldn't remember smiling like that in recent months. There could be no reason for it.

He sat back in his chair, tipping it onto its hind legs and rocking back and forth. After a few minutes, a librarian came over and asked him to keep all four legs planted firmly on the ground. Ted thought about the money in the envelope back at Jack's apartment. He'd left it there—the seam unbroken—but now he was hungry and wished he had some money for the vending machine. But it had seemed very important to leave the envelope untouched.

He'd spent months recovering in that hospital bed, and Jack was the only person who came to visit. He was there when Ted woke up. He was there when Ted admitted there was no way he could pay his rent in the city anymore. And his son said, stay with me, until you get on your feet. Ted wanted to ask, why? Why would you do this for me? Because Ted wasn't sure he'd ever done anything for his son, not anything meaningful. He bought him a puppy for his tenth birthday but the boy's mother made him take it back, so that couldn't count. Jack used to call him and ask to spend the weekends—he wanted to get away from his mother and her boyfriends—and it wasn't like Ted wanted to say no all the time, but he had to work. After a time, Jack stopped calling. Now, Ted had all the

time in the world but Jack was never home, and when he was, they had nothing to say to one another.

Ted looked at the picture of Claudia. He wanted to see her—to see if she was altered in any way. He knew how he was physically changed; that was easy to pick out—the limp, the stiff joints, the shooting pains that came on at night only so they could wake him up. But that couldn't be everything. Surely Claudia felt this too, this loss of who she used to be and the life she used to have. Surely if he could see her, he would know this, and in knowing this, perhaps there was hope that things could be different now too, could turn around. He needed to find a way to get out to Moss Beach.

There was a bus that let off a mile and a half from the farm. He'd have to walk along the two-lane highway; his limp would take him longer and would tire him out, but there was just no other way. He snacked on some wasabi peanuts he'd found in the back of Jack's cupboard. They made him thirsty.

When he made it to the farm's address, there was a long dirt road and a locked gate. Well, shit. He hadn't thought to call ahead. Did he need an appointment? Suppose he was just some poor lost soul who'd happened upon this place, and it was his fate to adopt some battered, snarling puppy. Suppose then. How was he supposed to get in?

He'd almost made his mind up to start walking back to the bus stop when a pick-up truck slowed on the highway and turned into the drive. The driver rolled down his window. It was a man, somewhere around sixty, missing one of his front teeth, wearing a broken-in cowboy hat made to look like cowhide.

“Can I help you here?” the man asked.

“I read about the farm in the paper. I’ve taken an interest,” Ted said.

“Where’s your car?” the man said, looking around.

“Don’t have one. Took the bus.”

“Ah,” the man said. “Well, hop in the cab here. Farm’s still a good half mile up the road. Claudia’ll be with ‘em now.”

Ted felt prickly at the mention of her name. He hadn’t even allowed himself to say it out loud yet. He pulled himself into the cab of the truck.

“Claudia,” he said, drawing out the *ahhh*. “She’s the owner?”

The man—his name was Wayne—nodded. As they drove up toward the farm, he pointed out a lone tree overlooking the ocean. “That’s where we had to put down Willow. We just could never get her turned around, and she kept getting out. We couldn’t figure out how. She was smart. When it’s my time to leave this earth, I sure hope I get one last good look at the water.”

They rounded a corner, and Ted saw a large brown house with a barn behind. The house seemed lopsided, with three stories on the left side, a bay window even, but the right side a flat one-story, rather dull-looking appendage. It was as if the architect lost sight of his vision halfway through, and rather than taking stock of what was already there, started over completely. Ted asked Wayne if he lived there.

“Naw,” Wayne said. “She wouldn’t allow *that*.” Ted’s leg itched, and he rubbed it against the door handle, while Wayne pulled up next to the barn, where a woman came out at the sound of the engine, her hair pulled back, a dog at her heels. She smiled at

Wayne and gave him a small salute, in the way friends with an easy intimacy might do, until she noticed Ted in the passenger seat. Her body tightened and she gave Wayne a questioning look. Wayne left the cab and motioned for Ted to follow. As Ted made his way around the truck, he could see a faint red scar that ran from her hairline to jaw.

“I found this fellow loitering outside the gate,” Wayne said evenly. Ted looked at him sideways, but Wayne was smiling.

“I’m Ted,” he said, extending his hand. The woman paused for a moment, her eyes continuing to probe him, but she took Ted’s hand with her left and gave him a weak shake.

“Claudia,” she said. The dog stayed close to her side—it was wagging its tail but Ted noticed the powerful legs, the jaw, the teeth. He felt hazy. “How can I help you?” she asked. Ted suspected she was a few years younger than him, somewhere around forty. He explained about the article he’d read, how he wanted to see the place for himself. He had an interest in dogs, was maybe looking to adopt.

“I had a pit mix once,” he said. “Someone opened the gate while I was at work one day. I never saw her again.” Ted had never had a dog. He liked the idea of it, though. His own father had been afraid of dogs—he never admitted this, of course, but Ted’s mother got to drinking three or four glasses of wine on nights when her husband didn’t come home at all and she fell into the habit of spilling his secrets, which Ted would listen to with a degree of eagerness though he didn’t like to look at his mother while she was talking because the smile on her face really was too much—so he’d never had a dog himself. But he’d wanted Jack to have one, because a boy should have a dog. But then his

ex-wife called to say that Jack couldn't have a dog, there was just no way, and he'd have to take it himself. He heard Jack wailing in the background, and he felt like he was being made out to be the bad guy. He took the dog back, thinking Jack could visit it when he stayed over, but after a few days of laying newspaper and losing one of every pair of his shoes, Ted took the dog back to the shelter. And now, he couldn't even remember what kind it had been.

"That's a terrible story," Claudia said. "To lose a pet like that." She motioned to the dog at her side. "This is Del. A rescue. I couldn't bear to part with her." She patted Del with her right hand, and Ted noticed she couldn't fully extend her fingers.

She offered to take him on a tour of the farm, and they headed for the dogs' pens which were held in the low, flat part of the house. She currently had seven, one of whom was ready to be adopted but the family had just backed out the day before yesterday, owing perhaps to the story out of Florida that a pit bull had killed a toddler. "He never should have been left alone," she said. "They don't tell the story about the Chihuahua who chewed a baby's fingers and toes in Portland." When Ted and Claudia entered the kennel, the dogs perked up, jumping against their gates, barking hellos. Claudia greeted each one by name, though Ted couldn't really hear above the barks ringing around in his head. There was a muted bleach smell just over that of dog, which in Ted's limited experience he likened to warm tortilla chips gone soggy round the edges. Every pen had a rubber mat and stacks of blankets and quilts and a door leading outside to a large fenced-in yard.

"How do they come to you?" Ted asked.

“All different ways. Four of the ones we have now are from a dog fighting ring they busted in Hayward. One from a family that lost their house and had to move into an apartment. Two more from animal control.”

Wayne peeked in through one of the windows, and Claudia gave him a thumbs up with her left hand. He started opening the doors to the outside for each of the pens, one by one, and the dogs leapt at the chance—Ted swore he saw one’s feet leave the ground—to run outside into the brightness. Ted felt his leg cramping and shifted his weight. Claudia tucked her hair behind her ear. She seemed just fine to Ted. She wouldn’t lose the farm, something would work out. Her left hand was just fine. She smiled and had a place to live and she had these dogs and she had Wayne.

“I don’t blame them for wanting out so bad,” Ted said, raising his chin at the empty dog pens. “They seem awful cooped up in here.” Claudia stiffened and brought her hand to her ear to push a piece of hair away that wasn’t there.

“Wayne’s just taken them out,” she said. She was looking down at her shoes—one of her laces had come undone.

“Yes, but when they’re inside. When they’re in here,” Ted said, running his fingers along the cage closest to him. He gave it a light tug, as if to test its durability, aware he was moving in a direction he might not be able to spin away from.

“It’s all regulation,” Claudia said. She turned away from him to check a clipboard mounted to the wall, running her finger down the list of handwritten notes. Anything to avoid looking at him, directly.

“I don’t doubt that. Just seems cruel, keeping them pent up. Boxed in.” Ted felt the weight of what he was saying and wanted in that moment to be in Jack’s apartment, even though whenever he was in Jack’s apartment, he wanted to be anywhere else.

“They get the proper amount of exercise and training every day. This is how things are done,” Claudia said, as she walked to the door.

“Of course, of course,” Ted said, holding his hands up in mock surrender. “I didn’t mean to offend.”

“It’s fine.” Claudia’s smile tightened. She paused. “I do have an awful lot I need to get done today. Would you mind if we made an appointment for you to come back? If you’re still considering adoption?”

“Ok.” She reached into her pockets, but they were empty.

“I’ll have to go get my card,” she said, as she left the room. Ted waited a moment and then followed her outside. As she climbed the stairs to the main part of the house, she called out, “I’ll just be a minute.”

She couldn’t really be fine. There was the newspaper article after all—that counted for something. She might lose everything, and then she’d be just like him.

He knew he should stay outside and wait for her to come back, thank her for her time and leave. But instead, he climbed the steps to the main house and let the door slam behind him. Later, he would describe it as though his body was moving of its own accord. He heard and followed the sound of drawers closing to his right. He passed through a room with wood paneling; even with the white lace curtains open, it was dark. The air in this room felt old, and the furniture heavy and long-used, as if he’d moved

from the sunshine into a wake. He found Claudia in the kitchen, and she froze when she saw him, though out of fear or confusion or perhaps even recognition, Ted didn't know. But she quickly composed herself.

"They're in here somewhere," she said as she continued rummaging. "We don't get that many visitors out here."

Ted leaned against the door frame as Claudia opened another drawer, not so careful now as she pulled papers out, letting them fall to the floor and gather round her feet.

"The article mentioned an accident," he said. She stopped with her hand in the drawer and looked up at him. Her face was flushed. He felt like he might be sick, though after barging into the kitchen uninvited, he couldn't imagine anything more distressing than vomiting on the linoleum. Would he then offer to clean it up? Or pretend it didn't happen? Which was worse?

"Yes, there was an accident," she said. Her eyes seemed wider now, as if she knew. It had all happened so quickly—he'd looked up and there was the bike and a person, a pink helmet and eyes—and he didn't think he would ever forget those, and how then could she forget his?

"You were on a bike?" he asked, taking a step into the kitchen, swallowing bile and willing her to see him, to really see him.

"I don't like to talk about it," she said. She picked up a piece of paper off the floor and started writing on it. "This will really have to do for now. I don't know where those

damn cards have run off to.” She handed him the paper. Her name and a phone number. “I’ll have Wayne drive you back down the road.”

Ted wanted to press but she was already ushering him through the wood-paneled room and out the side door. How was he to know now, when she wouldn’t even look at him?

Ted shook her left hand again, and he felt her eyes on him through the kitchen window as he walked to the passenger side of Wayne’s truck. He tried to walk as smoothly as possible, with slow deliberate steps. When he reached the door and turned around, she wasn’t watching anymore.

Wayne was kind enough to drive Ted all the way to the bus stop, but he could tell he wasn’t to expect this kindness again. On the bus ride home, a woman sat down next to Ted, despite the fact that there were plenty of empty seats. She smelled like cotton candy or some kind of medicine—sweet and sickly—like the kind administered at the hospital. It made his stomach turn.

When Jack came home on Friday night, Ted had made spaghetti. The sauce had congealed a bit, but he expected it’d taste the same no less. He handed his son a paper plate full of food, so heavy it sagged in the middle, and they sat down on the living room sofa, and Ted asked Jack about his week.

Jack shrugged between mouthfuls—it was all the same—and told his father he was having some friends over in a few hours and maybe he could make himself scarce.

Ted took a bite of spaghetti, which seemed now the consistency of paste. He stared at his plate—a red ring forming around the limp noodles—until he managed to swallow. The library was certainly closed by now. He spun the spaghetti around his fork, circling round and round without ever bringing the fork to his mouth. When he looked back up, Jack was staring at Ted’s fork as he dragged it round the plate.

“No mind,” Jack said, bringing one last forkful to his mouth. “You can hang out here, I guess.” His plate was cleared. “As long as you’re cool about it.”

“I’m always cool,” Ted said. And so he found himself a few hours later wedged on the couch between Ax, a cook at the Denny’s, and Topa, a limousine driver who hoped to go into business with his uncle, the owner of a pet shop. Ted held his warm Bud Lite and asked Topa about the pet business.

“Puppy mills. Sad shit,” he said, before standing up because he’d called next in beer pong. Ted turned to Ax to ask him about how to keep his spaghetti sauce from congealing.

“I don’t know, man,” Ax said. “Stir it?” Then he was called up to the beer pong table too, and Ted was left alone on the couch, which was just as well as it tended to sag toward the middle the more weight it held.

He watched Jack playing beer pong, the way he laughed when the ball landed in the cup, the way he spilled more beer the more cups he downed. The bass on the radio turned up, no real discernible tune. His friends drinking all the beer Jack had bought. The quiet desperation with which he just wanted everyone to have a good time. The fact that there were no women here. Only a few sideways glances to the old man on the couch.

Some time later in the evening, Jack sat down next to Ted, his arm and leg touching his father's with an intimacy he never would have allowed if he'd been sober.

"Dad," he said. He laughed. "Dad." Ted wanted to put his arm around his son but wondered if that might be too much. If Jack might pull away.

"Dad, I was thinking. I was thinking about the money."

"Ok," Ted said, hoping Jack's friends weren't listening, hoping whatever Jack was about to say, it was because of the beer, not what he was really thinking.

"It's funny. It is. It's like when Mom used to give me an allowance." Someone had turned off the music—and Ted felt its absence, longed for the repetition, the dulling beat. Ted patted his son's knee, said maybe it was time for his friends to go home. Jack laughed again.

"Don't tell me what to do," he said, suddenly serious, jerking his body away from his father's.

"I'm not," Ted said. "I wouldn't."

"You've never told me what to do. You can't start now."

Ted had been nursing the one beer all this time, but the room started to shrink as if he'd had so many more. The sound of the ping pong ball hitting the rim of the plastic cup and bouncing off. Landing at his feet. He felt the pop as he crushed its thin membrane beneath his shoe.

"You're quite right about that," he said as he stood up. The couch sagged and Jack tipped into the middle, let his body go limp, made no move to get up.

Ted went back into his room and picked up a pair of jeans from the floor. He reached into the back pocket to pull out the slip of paper Claudia had given him. Her handwriting was childlike, and he wondered if she was right-handed and how if the accident had been different—if she'd fallen this way instead of that— maybe her handwriting wouldn't look like this at all.

Hours later, Ted lay on his air mattress, listening to Jack vomit in the toilet. He heard Jack stumble into bed and got up to place a glass of water next to his sleeping son. Topa was passed out on the living room couch, his hood pulled tight around his face because they hadn't yet turned on the heat. There were overturned cups littering the floor and light from the stairwell was coming in the window through slivers where the blinds were turned the wrong way.

Soon the envelope wouldn't be sealed and then there would be less and then none at all. Jack would tire of his old man hanging around—was tired already, Ted was sure of it—and that would be fine, or at least inevitable, at least the way it should be.

Maybe he could fix things. He would show Jack he was trying, he was making an effort. If he took Jack with him out to Moss Beach, he would see that Ted had found somebody—had found Claudia—who was in the same place, that they could work through this together. And Claudia, she would see he had a son. She would see what this had done to him. She would feel the way he felt. He wasn't picturing some big weepy scene. He hoped instead the three of them could just sit, maybe on Claudia's front steps, looking out at the ocean. They might talk or they might not, but the point would be that they were all together.

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The next day was Saturday, and Jack didn't take kindly to his father rousing him from bed at noon. His head still ached, he said. But Ted promised he'd get him an egg biscuit and that where they were going would be worth it. Jack let his father drive his car—a '95 Honda Civic with manual everything—and leaned his head against the cool glass of the window.

They were in luck today, because the gate to Claudia's farm was open.

"Where're we going?" Jack asked.

"This lady I met," Ted said, "she takes care of dogs that need homes. I was thinking we could look at them. Something we could do together."

"I'm not allowed to have pets in my apartment."

"Well, I thought you might say that. Pretty sure the neighbor across the way has a Golden Retriever, but I thought you might say it."

"I don't want to get kicked out, is all."

"We could look for a new place, maybe. A little house or something, a townhouse. Something with a yard."

"I can't afford that," Jack said.

"Well, once I get a job." As they rounded the last bend up the hill, Claudia's house came into view. In the rearview mirror, Ted could see the ocean, small foamy waves building and receding. Dots that could be sea lions or surfers or nothing at all.

"What the hell is this place?" Jack asked.

“We’re just going to take a look,” said Ted. He pulled up next to the kennel, and when he got out of the car and shielded his eyes against the sun, he could make out the shape of a woman up the side of a fenced-in hill, with a few of the dogs running around her. She was facing him, standing still. He waved but she did not wave back. After a few long minutes, she started down the hill.

The sun cast a glow around her as she walked slowly toward him, and he couldn’t see her features until she stepped into the shadow of the house. Her face was calm, unemotional.

“Hi there,” she said. No attempt at a smile this time. Ted was hoping she might have softened, she might want to see him again as much as he’d wanted to see her, once she’d had a chance to think about it. “I thought you were going to make an appointment.”

“We were just driving by and thought we might stop in,” he said as he gestured to Jack, who was still sitting in the front seat of the car. Jack rolled his eyes, but undid his seat belt and opened the door. The car started dinging—the keys had been left in the ignition—and Jack reached over to pull them out before getting out of the car.

“This is my son, Jack,” Ted said. Claudia and Jack nodded at each other.

“You’ve caught me at a bad time,” she said. “Though I’m expecting Wayne any moment. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll go call him and see what’s keeping him.” She walked away without waiting for Ted to answer.

“Why’s she acting like that?” Jack asked.

“Like what?”

“Like she’s got something up her ass.”

“She isn’t. Don’t say that.”

“What are we doing here? I don’t want a dog.”

“I know.”

Jack kicked a rock, and it bounced off the tire of his car, leaving a white chalky print on the rubber. “Then tell me why we’re here.”

Since he’d been living with Jack, Ted had started walking down to the beach some mornings, when he knew Jack was surfing. He kept back near the recycling cans—the sand was soft there—and if Jack had ever seen him there, he never said anything. From that distance even, he thought he could pick Jack out—the way his body balanced on the board, the way he shook his head free of water when he surfaced. Surely he must know which one of these bodies in the water belonged to his son.

“If I tell you, you have to keep calm,” Ted said. Jack tilted his head to one side, not agreeing or disagreeing so much as acknowledging that he knew whatever was coming next couldn’t be good.

“I found this place through her. Claudia. She was the cyclist. In the accident.” Jack’s eyes widened.

“Does she know who you are?” Jack asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“This is insane. Tell her to go fuck herself and then we can leave. That horrible bitch.”

“It was an accident.”

“It was her fault. She hit you. End of fucking story.”

“Why are you getting so upset?” Ted asked.

“Why aren’t you? I saw you all hooked up to wires in that hospital bed. You’re *living with me* for god’s sake.”

“I know. I know all this,” Ted said.

“Then what the hell are we doing here?”

Ted looked at Claudia’s house, the low, flat angles of the kennel, and a bike leaned up against the side closest to the road. A new, shiny silver bike.

The kitchen door opened and Claudia came back outside, this time holding a phone.

“This is bullshit,” Jack said, as he turned away and starting walking up the hill toward the fenced-in dog pen.

“Where’s he going?” Claudia asked, when she reached Ted.

“Just to look at the dogs. If that’s ok.” Claudia cupped her hands over her eyes to watch Jack. A truck turned off the road and started winding its way up the gravel drive.

“That’ll be Wayne,” Claudia said. They both looked back up at Jack, who was running his fingers along the fence as he made his way up. “He shouldn’t do that.” But neither of them made a move to yell out or go to him. They watched him drag his hand along the links and the dogs came to him and he reached a part of the fence with a gate—it wasn’t locked because he pulled up the latch. “No,” she said, softly. And he opened it and stood to the side as the three dogs stepped out tentatively, slowly. “No,” louder. Then one of them started running down toward the road—and beyond that the water—and the other two followed and they were moving so quickly, Claudia hadn’t time to yell “No”

but once more. The dogs were distant blurs now. Jack still stood up the hill with his hand on the gate.

“I don’t know why he did that,” Ted said, stepping toward Claudia, his hands outstretched, palms up, a plea.

“You do,” she said, stepping away. Wayne pulled into view of the house and Claudia waved him over frantically. He pulled up and she opened the passenger side door and got in. Ted ran around—as fast he could—to Claudia’s side of the truck, where the window was rolled down just a crack.

“He shouldn’t have done it,” Ted said after her, his voice rising. “I didn’t tell him to.”

Claudia was speaking low to Wayne and he shot an angry look at Ted, and made a move to get out of the truck, but Claudia laid her hand on his forearm. There wasn’t time for this, not now.

“I’m sorry,” he said, pressing his hands against the door. “I’m sorry.” She looked at him through the window—her scar invisible through layers of glass.

“I expected this would happen,” she said. “One day.” This. She couldn’t possibly mean *this*. She looked at Wayne and he shifted into drive. Ted stepped back and they sped down the road and toward Route 1, toward where they’d last seen the dogs disappearing over the hills.

Ted was aware of his leg now—the throbbing—and from the corner of his eye he saw Jack coming down the hill. Ted walked back to Jack’s car and got in the driver’s side—it felt good to relieve some of the pressure from his leg. He leaned his head against

the headrest and closed his eyes. When he opened them a few minutes later, Jack was grabbing for the door handle of the passenger side. Ted reached across the seat and pushed the lock button on the door. Jack pulled the keys out from his pocket, and Ted held his finger over the lock. He stared at Jack and Jack stared at him—Jack with the keys in his hands and Ted with his finger keeping the lock pressed down and the uneven house on one side of them and the ocean stretching out on the other.

## FORECASTING

She called Jesse about the bear. A bear that's been shot but not killed is bound to be angry. She told him she hated to call, but she did, because she didn't know what else to do. Barricade herself inside? Sit out front in an aluminum chair with a shotgun in her lap?

That morning, the neighbor from down the mountain, an old man who lived alone—who'd always lived alone as far as she could tell—came up to let her know about the bear. He'd allowed some men—boys he called them—to hunt on his property, but he wouldn't have said yes if he'd known they couldn't finish the job. Nothing worse than an injured bear, he said. Fearless.

After the neighbor left, she stood looking out the front door into the orchard, where earlier in the year she'd see the branches shake, the leaves rustle, the apples disappear one by one. The trees were bare now of leaves, the branches twisting and tangling, the fruit rotting nearby. She thought about Robbie, her son with Jesse, who'd been living at home since he graduated high school two years ago. She hadn't seen him for four days now. He'd made a habit of disappearing. He'd done this first at age twelve. Then, it was the same neighbor who'd driven up to say he'd seen Robbie in the woods, with an old blanket draped over tree branches to act as shelter.

Jesse said she should just hold tight. He wanted to know again what the neighbor told her. She didn't have enough details

“Maybe I should just come over.” He paused. “I’ll have to ask Jan.”

“It’s really not necessary.” She wanted him to worry about her up there on the mountain, alone. She called him, yes. But there wasn’t anything he could fix, really. “I don’t know what you could do.”

“No, no. I’ll come,” he said. Jan, his wife, would mind. Jesse would probably come anyway. Esther had only called him back to the house a few times; she held onto these favors he felt he owed her—and if she was being honest, she felt he owed her too—for moments when she truly needed him. When a piece of the roof flew off during the derecho that swept through the county with no warning at all. Or when she ran over antlers with the John Deere and they punctured the tire. Or when Robbie had slipped away again the summer after he graduated from high school.

Esther tried to occupy herself in the house, but every time she looked out the window, she was afraid of what she’d see. A bear, mad and charging. Or worse yet, a trail of blood on the deck and the bear out of sight. And yet, she felt sorry for the poor thing. To be hurt and alone, and maybe it could sense it was still being hunted, but maybe also it just wanted that bullet out and to lay down and rest.

Esther met Jesse at the front door. She watched him through the glass as she walked the length of the house. He picked at one of his fingernails as she approached and didn’t raise his eyes to hers until she opened the door. Beyond him, she could see into his car, a car seat in the back. Were there Cheerios ground into the upholstery? Jesse used to hate when Robbie made a mess. Maybe he didn’t care anymore.

She had thought to invite him in, offer him a cup of tea, but the car seat made her pause.

“You all doing ok?” he asked.

“I think so. Just on edge,” she said, leaning into the door frame.

“I called a few folks.” Jesse still kept up with some of the old neighbors from the mountain and hollow, though he’d been living in town the past eight years. He’d always been better at making friends than her. “They’ve got a group out tracking it. I’d join in, but Jan made me promise not to.” That was to be expected. Sometimes it was easier to think of Jan not as a person, but as a force pulling Jesse away, piece by piece until he was hers completely.

“Is it ok to be outside? To walk to my car even?” Esther asked. She could answer these questions for herself, but she felt the need to keep talking, to justify his presence here. She couldn’t say: I thought if you were here, I would feel better. I thought you might know what to do about Robbie. I thought you would at least care to know what was happening here, this house, our house.

“I wouldn’t go on any hikes in the woods. I would take stock of your surroundings before heading to your car. Things like that.” She looked at her car now, the car that had been theirs once, that he’d left with her, that was covered in tree sap because he’d been the only one who cared about such things, who took the time to scratch off each hardened bit.

“Robbie’s left again.”

“Where is he?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know.”

“I haven’t seen him,” she said.

“Since when?”

“Sunday.”

Jesse straightened his neck and left off picking his nail. “Why didn’t you call me?” he asked.

Esther focused on the weather stripping that sealed the door against the outside. It was peeling at the edges and would need to be replaced soon. “It’s not anything new. You know that.”

When she looked up, Jesse was staring at her. She could tell he was angry, angry that she didn’t know where their son was, angry too that he didn’t know where their son was. Angry that neither of them knew. Angry that maybe he didn’t care.

“You let me know when you hear from him,” he said.

“Fine.” She went to close the door but he stopped it with his hand.

“Wait. The bear,” he said. “They’ll find it in no time, I’m sure.”

“What if they don’t?”

“You have your handgun?”

“I can’t use it.”

“Yes, you can.” He’d taught her to shoot; he’d decided that in living up on the mountain, they needed to know what they were doing. They’d used empty beer cans for targets and laughed every time she missed and then laughed harder every time she hit

one. He bought her her own gun that Christmas, a used .45 caliber Colt. This was back when they'd lay down on blankets outside in the sun. Make love. All this before Robbie. "It could take down a bear. If you hit it right."

"I don't want to."

"Please just keep it close. In case. And be aware." He knew her tendency of blocking out often what was most important. When Robbie ran away the first time, she scrubbed the grout in the shower, mildew that had accumulated over years through half-hearted purgings. She wouldn't leave the bathroom until it was white. "Stay inside, if anything feels out of the ordinary. And you can call me. If you have to." Jan would love that.

She watched him drive away, and she locked the door and started in on the dishes piling up in the sink, piling there since Robbie had left. She turned only the hot tap on, so that the steam rose damp on her face and the water burned her hands. She kept them there as long as she could stand it.

Jesse had always wanted to live in the mountains. He had grown up in the city and had some idealized version of what this would mean—building a house, cutting wood for fire, growing vegetables out back. Esther had grown up in the suburbs, and while this life—this country life—hadn't ever felt necessary, like it was something she had to do, she understood its appeal. And she loved Jesse. And it was something they would do, just the two of them.

After Esther graduated with her degree in social work, the two of them went trolling the Blue Ridge for bargains. They found a house at the top of an unnamed gravel drive, which the county would name Wolfe Mountain Lane in the nineties, a half mile up from the nearest neighbor. The house was all dark and splintered wood, and consisted of a kitchen and den with an old woodstove, and one large room upstairs.

They bought the house on the mountain, and for a time, they slept on blankets in the kitchen next to the wood stove. The house didn't have indoor plumbing—they got their water from the spring house down the road. The real estate agent had warned them about the outhouse, how the snakes liked to curl up in the latrine. They put in the bathroom first, and then they spent days scraping paint down to bare white walls. Everything stripped and raw for the next phase which included the kitchen and the upstairs. They decided that when the house was finished, they would be married there.

It was in the year after their wedding Jesse would whisper to her at night, are you ready yet? Isn't it time? And she would say, I don't know. I don't know. There are so many children already. Esther had seen things in her rounds: children with lice spilling out of their ears, children with boot prints on their backs, children so underweight they would vomit when she tried to feed them. There are so many children here already.

A compromise had to be made, and even that took convincing on both sides. Not our own child, Jesse asked. No, Esther said, I wouldn't feel right. She wasn't even sure she wanted to be a mother at all, but he picked and picked, and in four years' time, the compromise: they adopted a two-year-old boy whose name was Robbie. They prepared the spare bedroom with second-hand furniture and they painted the walls yellow, and

Esther made curtains and Jesse said they were nice, even if the hems weren't straight.

Jesse carved a wooden duck, and they placed it on Robbie's dresser.

But when they brought Robbie home, they were quickly unnerved by this child's presence in their house; this child who was nothing like the two-year-old they'd imagined. They pretended for each other they weren't upset when he cried but wouldn't let them hold him. They pretended these things take time, and they really believed it, but each one wondered separately: how long before this child becomes my child? They pretended they weren't thinking, oh God, what if it never happens? They pretended small moments, like when they woke up to Robbie sleeping on the floor next to their bed, meant more than they did. They pretended that when he ran off, at first for only a few hours, that every child went through this phase, and maybe they did, but none of their friends had children like Robbie. They pretended this didn't upset them.

They took him to doctors, to specialists, and were told that the first two years of Robbie's life had likely so traumatized him—these moments he couldn't even remember—that he wasn't able to bond with them. That he was an angry child. That he needed therapy. Jesse asked Esther, this is what you do. Why can't you do it with him? Jesse wanted more opinions. Esther knew that those first few years were crucial in Robbie's development. Her heart broke for whatever it was he'd seen and felt, but she couldn't make him love them.

He was twelve the first time he ran away and meant it. Their neighbor told them where he'd seen Robbie, and Jesse had wanted to go out and get him right away, but Esther had thought to give him time. Maybe he needed to cool off. They weren't even

sure why he'd run away this time, and what had compelled him to want to stay overnight. It could have been that he'd been assigned a genealogy project at school. Or that Esther had slipped and called him "darling," which he hated. Or that Jesse hadn't so much as looked in his direction the last few nights. They left him alone, but in the morning—after a night in which both of them lay together in bed, still, not touching, pretending sleep—Jesse had had enough.

"We can't just leave him out there." It was raining, and he put on his slicker and let the door slam behind him. Esther stood and turned her ring around her finger. It was almost an hour before he was back, carrying their twelve-year-old son in his arms. The only reason Robbie hadn't fought harder was because he'd gotten a head cold and was too weak to kick.

Esther felt Robbie's forehead and it was hot. Jesse took him upstairs where Esther undressed him and tucked him up in blankets. She went back downstairs to heat some soup. Jesse was leaning against the counter. She put her hand on his neck, but he pulled away.

"It's too much," Jesse said.

"He's just acting out," Esther said.

"No. It's more than that."

"I don't think so."

"He tried to bite me. When I picked him up he tried to bite me."

"He's sick."

“Yes. He is,” Jesse said as he ran his hand along the counter, tiles the two of them had laid together—Jesse had picked the blue and Esther the green. “I don’t want to do this anymore.”

“This,” Esther said.

“Robbie is not my son.” Jesse had wanted to father his own child, she knew this, but they had agreed this would be best. They had spoken of it and he had agreed. “He’ll never be my son. I thought I could make it feel like he was. I can’t.”

A compromise. Jesse backing out. Leaving them, leaving their home, leaving her. Esther being left with Robbie, alone. She didn’t want to say, *stuck*.

Jesse saying, “I can’t look at you anymore without seeing him.”

That night—the bear out in the woods, and maybe Robbie too—Esther lay in bed, listening to the wind blow branches against the tin roof. Shadows billowing across the skylight. Around four in the morning, she heard the radio blast from the garden and sat straight up in bed. She could see the garden from her bedroom window, but there were only the familiar shapes below. The fences Jesse had staked in himself. The garlic he’d planted from bulbs. It was probably only a rabbit.

Jesse had installed a motion-sensor in the garden that linked to a talk radio station—it was meant scare away animals, because even little thieves out for a bite of lettuce are jumpy. Every time she heard it now, she thought of the day Jesse installed it, how proud he was of himself. He would hop in and out of the garden just to hear it work. He did that for about a week. She could sometimes forget her anger, bury deep the

knowledge that she had been abandoned, left for doing something he'd wanted in the first place. But when she heard the radio— she never listened to the words themselves, what was being said—she couldn't forget who had put it there. She thought often about disconnecting it, but never made it further. Perhaps there was something to her anger, something that kept her in the right. The remembering of it that kept her afloat.

Other times, though, when she heard the radio, she could also think about Robbie, and the summer between his freshman and sophomore years when he'd helped her garden, and he'd discovered he was good with the earth, that he could make things grow. All summer, he would make her dinner—salads full of vegetables from the garden, piled high, bits of grit still clinging to cucumber skins because he'd washed them too carelessly. Nothing had ever tasted so good.

In the morning, Jesse called to see if everything was ok.

“There are no signs to the contrary,” Esther said. She heard Jan muffled in the background, and a squeal from Mara, their toddler. She'd seen them at the farmer's market once—Jesse with Mara on his shoulders. Jan wasn't with them, and this somehow made it worse. She followed them along one row, peering at them through basil and tomato plants. The child was beautiful, though Esther wasn't sure she saw much of Jesse in her. At fifty, Jesse was finally the father he'd always wanted to be. The sight of Jesse's little girl reminded her of all those late nights and how everything might have been different if she'd just said yes. If she'd said, yes, let's bring another child here, one who is ours and ours alone. She set down the basket of produce she'd yet to purchase and left.

“They found some tracks this morning down near the Hollow,” Jesse said. The

bear had made it far; Esther tried to imagine herself with a bullet in her side, dragging her bleeding body all that way. She felt dizzy. “But they lost the trail at the creek.”

“Suppose it’s dead already?” Esther asked.

“It’s possible,” Jesse said. “They’ll keep looking, though.” There was a pause then, a silence so long that it left her wondering if Jesse was still on the line at all. “And Robbie?”

“He didn’t magically appear overnight.”

“What if he’s out there again?”

“I can’t think about that.” Esther paused. “He could be anywhere you know.”

“I know,” Jesse said. Would he lay awake tonight, wondering?

The gymnasium where Robbie’s high school graduation was held was not air conditioned, and it was hot. Esther sat next to Jesse; the folding chairs were pushed close together to allow more room for family, but Esther kept her legs pressed close together so there would be no chance of hers rubbing against Jesse’s. Drops of sweat beaded down the backs of her legs. Jan wasn’t there. Esther found out later this was because Jan was pregnant and was worried about the heat. At the time, Jesse made no excuse for her absence. Esther thought maybe it was a kindness, although she also wondered if this made her even more pathetic in their eyes. Don’t come, Jan, it will be too hard for her.

Esther could see the back of Robbie’s head—he’d refused a haircut. There was a girl to the left of him with curly blond hair who kept flipping around and smiling and waving at her family. Once she even stuck her tongue out, but in a silly, I love you all

kind of way. Robbie wouldn't turn around and look at them, Esther knew. If he did, would she stick her tongue out at him? That might be just the thing to make him laugh. Or embarrass him beyond repair. It would be a gamble. But she needn't have worried, because he never did look back.

When the principal called Robbie's name, he walked slowly to the center of the stage and took the principal's hand, posing briefly for the photo as he was supposed to. He didn't smile. Esther and Jesse clapped but didn't yell or whistle like some of the other families. For Esther, there was a sense of muted accomplishment, that she'd gotten him here, and whatever happened next she couldn't control it, but there was relief in that. It was harder to know what Jesse felt. He saw Robbie once every few months; Robbie had stopped agreeing to meet in town and Jesse had to come up to the house. Since Jan, this was less and less. Whatever connection tying Jesse to Esther and Robbie had been stretching and stretching, and Esther wasn't sure if it would break entirely. When it would break.

After the ceremony, they met Robbie by Esther's car. Robbie let Esther give him a hug, and Jesse a handshake. Esther had told Jesse before the ceremony not to ask: well, what now? This had been a point of contention for months. Robbie didn't want to go to college. Esther didn't say anything. Jesse had told her she was being crazy. Robbie needed to be pushed. She had to push him. Esther asked Jesse, why is it me? Why do I have to push? I don't want to push.

Jesse handed Robbie an envelope, said he was proud, and then made some excuse about needing to get home. Esther took Robbie out to a nice lunch—a celebration—but neither of them said all that much.

That summer, Robbie took off one day while Esther was at work. She didn't hear from him for three weeks, until he showed up in the middle of the night—she'd thought she was being burgled at first and wished she kept her gun upstairs. When she tiptoed down the stairs and turned the lights on in the kitchen, Robbie was eating a drumstick he'd pulled out of the fridge. He was filthy—his hair was matted and she could see a fine layer of dirt on his skin and clothes. He looked like he weighed ten pounds less than the last time she'd seen him, and he was a small, skinny kid to begin with.

“Hi Esther,” he said. He'd been calling Jesse and her by their first names since around age seven. One night, she'd gone to tuck him in and he said “Goodnight, Esther,” and she felt herself sinking. She'd told Jesse about it, and he shook his head, as if to say you should have been ready for this. What did you expect?

“Robbie, what on earth? You scared me to death.”

“I was hungry.”

“Where have you been? I had no way to reach you.” Robbie finished his chicken and rummaged in the fridge until he pulled out a carton of egg salad, which he started eating with a spoon. “Your father and I were worried sick. Again.”

Robbie paused with the spoon halfway to his mouth at the mention of the word “father.”

“I’m sure,” Robbie said. “I just had to get away for a bit.” He always said that, *just had to get away, needed a breather, no big deal. Don’t make it a big deal. You’re making it a big deal.* It was a big deal, Esther wanted to tell him. Even now, Robbie was technically an adult, but how could she not be bothered when she didn’t know where he was? When he just disappeared?

Robbie had picked up a part-time job at a garden center after he graduated, but when Esther called them after she hadn’t heard from him for a few days, to ask if they knew where he might be, they said no. And he didn’t need to bother with coming back.

“Where have you been living?” Esther asked, as she pulled out some bread. She took the carton of egg salad from him, and spread a big spoonful on a slice of bread. “Do you want some lettuce?” she asked. Robbie shook his head and took the sandwich from her.

“The woods,” he said.

“Here?” Esther asked. Robbie nodded.

“I’ve got a tent. A big jar of peanut butter.” Her son had been nearby this whole time, his bed just a few miles away, and he chose instead to sleep outside.

“I don’t understand when you just leave,” Esther said. Robbie shrugged and opened the fridge again to rummage for more food.

“Well, I’m here now,” he said. Esther was too tired to make him explain himself, and she’d never been particularly successful at that anyway. So, she made up his bed with fresh sheets while he took a shower. He let her hug him before he went into his room, and she noticed how her shampoo smelled different in his hair, and she remembered holding

him after she bathed him when he was a toddler, and how he'd go rigid in her arms, and she thought if she just held him long enough, he might relax.

Jesse called Esther at work to tell her they'd found the bear. Esther let out a quick breath.

"Well, not quite," Jesse said. "Sounds like Mrs. Carter—you know down in that yellow house at the bottom of the mountain—saw it in her backyard, loping towards the tree line."

"And they killed it?"

"Well, no. Mrs. Carter saw the bear."

"So, it's still out there?" Esther asked.

"Yes."

"You said they found it."

"They did," Jesse said.

"But it's still out there." Esther stood up at her desk, where if she balanced on tiptoes she could see over the cubicle walls and to the parking lot.

"I just said that."

"How do you think this makes me feel?" she asked. A car was backing out and turned too hard, clipping the bumper of the car next to it. A slight pause and the car continued, as if nothing had happened at all. The car that been hit rocked lightly, still reeling—if only a little bit—from the impact.

"It won't be much longer. It'll all be fine."

“Shouldn’t there be blood?” she asked. “A trail to follow?”

“That fur’s so thick, just soaks it right up.” Jesse paused. “Have you heard from Robbie?”

“I can’t keep doing this,” she said.

“What do you want me to do?” Jesse asked.

“Nothing, you can’t do anything.” She hung up. She grabbed her coat and went outside to the parking lot. She stopped in front of the car that had been hit. She didn’t know whose it was, but it looked fine—smooth lines and paint intact. You’d never even know.

When she got home, she paused with her hand on the front door knob. The time Robbie burned himself on the stove, the howling, Esther chasing Robbie around the house with a cold washcloth. He didn’t want to be comforted. What’s wrong with him, Jesse asked. Nothing, Esther said. Everything.

She could change the locks, she could hole up in here and no one would ever come looking for her. Or somebody might come, but it wouldn’t matter. Nothing would change.

Esther woke with a start. The radio in the garden was blaring—a weather forecast, an expectation of snow. She tried to go back to sleep, but it tripped again and again, and as the words built up upon each other, she realized for the first time that the forecast was not for here, but from a station coming in from Chicago. It had never even been close to her at all.

She could go down to the basement and turn the whole system off. She could go into the upstairs hallway to the window that overlooked the garden—at this time of night the moon would be shining a beam right into the backyard—and maybe she would see a brown patch that would move and confirm what she thought she already knew. The bear in her garden, digging for a carrot, gripping the root in its mouth, limping toward where it had opened a patch of fence.

The gun was in her bedside table, where she'd been storing it since Jesse told her to keep it close. She could go downstairs, then outside. She could end this all right now—for her and her sleepless nights, for the men made helpless, for her son who might be out there too, but most of all for the bear in her garden.

And without really wishing it, because to wish something is to admit it might not come true, she thought how it could be Robbie out there instead, pulling up the last of the root vegetables, not willing yet to come inside. Foraging. But safe.

She lay in bed and listened to the weather forecast. An accumulation of four to six inches washing over her. Temperatures dipping overnight. Wind chills and cautions to stay off the roads.

## GOING HOME WITH

Lauren was the only person Melody knew in the city, and when she suggested Melody come out with her and some of her co-workers, Melody agreed to a beer or two. They met up at a small bar in the Mission, and Lauren and her friends did shots at the bar, while Melody took sips off a beer that hadn't even been cold when the bartender exchanged it for her five dollars. The wood paneling on the walls was chipping away in large patches, and there was a band shoved into the corner without a stage or lights. The music screamed at her, though she made an effort to listen. Melody found herself focusing on the closest moving object—the hands of the bass player. He wasn't that good looking—at least not as good looking as the singer or the other guitar player—but there was something about the way he played that she couldn't stop watching—fast and hard and rhythmic. He had a sleeve of tattoos on one arm that spiraled upward and disappeared up into his shirt. It was all so typical, she could have told you what he looked like if she'd been staring at a wall. Still, she watched him.

She could hear Lauren and her friends—swaying in their high heels—above the breaks in the songs. Melody had been living in the city with Lauren for a month. When Thomas broke up with her—when they decided to end things is how she told it—and she was not yet ready to head home, to admit that it had all been a mistake, to prove to everyone what they'd suspected all along, that she was simply lost; she decided to trade in the Silicon Valley and move up the peninsula to San Francisco. She found a room

through Craigslist with Lauren, who'd seemed nice enough, and the apartment was in an old Victorian building and just a few steps from the MUNI stop where she could catch a bus straight to the office supply store at which she'd managed to find work. This, of course, was only temporary.

She'd unpacked all her boxes that very first night and spent every night after sitting in her room, reading books she'd already read but in the past always found comforting. But she soon found the words blurring and couldn't get through more than a page or two without feeling like there was something else she was supposed to be doing.

So by the time Lauren invited her out for a drink, she could think of no reason to say no. After three or four warm beers, Lauren's friends started fractioning off. Lauren wobbled over to see if Melody wanted to split a cab with her and "him," indicating with her head a man waiting by the door, a man probably ten years older than Lauren would have gone for if she could have seen straight. Melody declined.

She stayed until the band stopped playing and started packing up their equipment. She stayed as the bartender wiped down the bar and asked the last few stragglers to leave. She thought of Lauren and "him" back at their apartment. Had they even made it to Lauren's room. The bartender looked at her, and she said, "I'm with the band." He kept wiping the bar. As the band made their way out the back door, the bartender raised his eyes, and Melody left her stool and followed them into the little holding room in the back, where they were loading a van through a door propped with a brick.

The singer saw her first, and he nudged the bass player in the ribs. The bass player looked up, stared at her for a moment—assessing—and smiled.

She woke up in his bed, before the sun, and had to pee. She willed herself to go back to sleep, because she knew if she got up she wouldn't be able to come back, her sober self wouldn't be able to slip into his arms again, as if she belonged there. She'd only just now let herself admit that she missed that feeling of someone next to her in the bed. But her bladder felt about to burst, and she quietly untangled herself and picked up her clothes from the floor. In the bathroom, she realized she'd left her underwear somewhere in his room, but she wasn't willing to go back for them. It took her a few minutes of stumbling around in the dark of the apartment until she found the front door.

She spent the next hour sitting just inside the entryway to the bass player's apartment building because it was cold and she was at least fifteen blocks from her own apartment and she was nervous about walking home alone in the dark.

Later that morning, Lauren pressed her.

"But where were you?" she asked.

"Out."

There was a creaking, and the man Lauren had brought home the night before stood in the door to her room in only his boxer shorts, a small gut round his middle. He looked even older here, with the natural light from the living room windows shining on his pale body. He smiled tentatively, eyes darting between the two roommates, as if perhaps he wasn't sure which one he'd come home with.

"Morning," Lauren said. She picked up a piece of toast and took a bite.

"Bathroom's that way," she said, pointing with the toast end, not noticing the crumbs

flaking off. He smiled again, more confident now, and closed the bathroom door behind him. “Jesus, I hope he fucking leaves soon.” She shuddered. “I was so drunk.”

This wasn't the first time Melody had seen this from her roommate. Or heard such words. Maybe if they'd been better friends, Melody might have asked: then why? But her head hurt this morning too.

Lauren went into her bedroom, quietly closing the door behind her. Melody heard the click of the lock turning into place. When the man came out of the bathroom dressed, he looked around for Lauren. He knocked on her door lightly, but she didn't answer. He tried the handle. He brought his hand to knock again, seemed to think better of it, and left the apartment, keeping his eyes on his feet.

Melody could have understood what Lauren was doing, or at least dealt with it, if not for the fact that she knew Lauren had a boyfriend. She'd been living with Lauren for two weeks when Dan first came around. He'd been traveling, for work he said. By this time, Melody had seen several different men emerging from Lauren's bedroom, but heard no mention of a boyfriend.

She had opened the door, and a man with a full beard and t-shirt and Giants cap, nothing remotely like any of the men Lauren brought home, introduced himself.

“Do you mind if I wait for her? She's supposed to meet me,” Dan asked.

“Oh. Ok,” Melody said, standing aside so he could slip past her into the apartment, vaguely worried that perhaps this was all a ruse, that this man was actually going to murder her and dump her body in the park.

Instead, though, he settled down on the sofa and turned on the television. Melody sat in the chair farthest from the sofa and picked up the book she had been reading.

“Lauren said you’re from Maryland?” Dan asked, as he flipped through channels, bright flashes bouncing off the windows.

“At some point, I was.”

“Isn’t a person always from somewhere?” he asked. He stopped flipping, the television landed on some kind of game show. Rapid Spanish fired through the speakers.

“Technically, sure.”

“Technically?”

“I don’t know,” Melody said. “I guess I want to claim a place for myself. At some point.”

“Huh,” Dan said. “I never thought of it that way. I’ve always introduced myself as Dan. From Bakersfield. I should lose the Bakersfield.”

They talked about living in California, about growing up there, and Melody asked about Bakersfield. Dan said it smelled like shit—actual shit—because of all the cows penned right by the highway. When Lauren came home, they were laughing, and she went straight to her room without saying anything. Dan waited a few minutes before going to check on her.

Melody didn’t know if Dan knew about Lauren’s evenings when they weren’t together. She asked Lauren about it later that night, if whatever was between them was just a casual thing, if maybe the term boyfriend was being used loosely.

“No,” Lauren said. “We’ve been together four years.” Lauren looked at Melody straight-on, a challenge then, willing her to say something about it.

Melody suspected that Thomas had left her because he’d met someone else, someone at work. For a while near the end, he kept getting calls that he’d leave the room to take. She never worked up the courage to ask who was on the other line. It would have been worse to hear that she was right. And he never of course admitted to any of this when he left. But he had, at least, left. Whatever Lauren was doing was surely worse. She was going on with Dan as if things were fine.

“Why didn’t Dan move in?” Melody asked. “Instead of me?” Lauren picked at the nail polish on her index finger.

“Living together,” Lauren said. “I don’t really do that.”

“And he’s ok with that?” Melody asked.

“Sure. People need their space.” Well, yes, of course. Lauren had figured it all out. Brilliant.

It had taken those next two weeks of Melody sitting home alone until she was willing to stop being angry on behalf of someone she didn’t even know. It wasn’t her business—Lauren and Dan.

The next weekend, Melody didn’t need any convincing to go out. She found the bar where the bass player’s band was playing—she hadn’t heard from him but she couldn’t be sure he had her phone number, or if he did, that he would ever call her. Or if that bothered her.

The bar inside was dark and it took a few minutes for her eyes to adjust. The music was coming from a stage in the back corner, and people were packed in close to the band. She made her way to the bar to order a beer and listen to the band play, and when she closed her eyes, she could hear his fingers—his specifically—picking the strings. People pushed up against her, but she held close to the bar, so that when he ended his set and came for a drink, he would see her.

She went home with him again. This time, she didn't leave in the middle of the night; she traced her fingers over his tattoos, buried her head in the side of his body. In the morning, he said her name, how it was almost too corny for a musician to say out loud. How he could have written a song about her if only her name had been anything else. She wished she'd told him her name was Lauren.

One night a few weeks later, she told Lauren about the bass player—or at least that there was a bass player. Lauren had a cold and Dan was traveling again, and Melody decided to stay in. She got drunk off a bottle of wine and Lauren was drunk off of cold medicine, and they sat on the couch, close together because the radiators in their apartment were sputtering but no heat seemed to be coming out. Lauren asked her where she went when she didn't come home. Melody phrased it this way—I'm kind of seeing someone—because phrasing is crucial at this point. It isn't dating yet, and seeing someone leaves open the possibility of other someones. Lauren perked up—at least as much as was possible through her syrupy haze. He plays the bass, Melody said. There was some pleasure in being able to say this.

Lauren leaned against a pillow and closed her eyes, saying “I wish Dan played the bass.”

“And that would be enough?” Melody asked, finishing off the bottle, considering whether to open another.

“Mm-huh,” Lauren said, drifting off. What Melody meant to ask was: when will you stop fucking around? But Lauren wasn’t awake and maybe it wasn’t a fair question. Maybe there were things Melody couldn’t see.

While she thought the thing with the bass player might begin to make more sense, to feel less uncertain, it didn’t. Over the next few months, she found herself waiting to hear from him, and she wouldn’t, and rather than sit around night after night and wonder, she would seek him out, show up where his band was playing. Sometimes she’d watch him talk to other women, take them home instead. Sometimes, though, it was her. It didn’t matter, really. Except, when it did.

One night, she stood next the bar, watched the bass player kiss another girl, put his hand on the small of her back and guide her outside—she thought how she had seen this before and she didn’t care to see it again. She wanted him to notice her and only her.

There was a tattoo shop around the corner from her apartment and she walked past most days without really noticing it, except for the neon signs which lit up the windows at night. But after that night, she walked by the shop and noticed the neon sign that said “Piercings” and she stopped, stared at the neon, wondering what it might feel like to touch it. She traced the curve of the letters with her fingers on the glass, and she

knew that this was something she could do, something she could control and predict the outcome of.

In the back room, which looked like a doctor's office complete with crinkly paper on the table, the woman who was to do it gave her a look that seemed to say, *I know you, you can't handle this, you're ridiculous*. This steeled her further; she signed the waiver without reading it and felt the woman's latexed hands on her left breast, marking the nipple with a pen. A clamp—metallic, cold—around her nipple and then the woman asked if she was ready and she closed her eyes. The needle went in, moved through her skin, a rush of feeling toward her center, and was out again before she had much time to think about how it stung.

A few days later— her nipple still bright red, swollen, her whole breast aching— she stood in front of the bathroom mirror, willing herself to touch it, trying to recognize herself, when Lauren walked in without knocking. She took in Melody—naked from the waist up—and her eyes widened as she noticed the ring.

“Didn't that *hurt*?” Lauren asked. Melody brought her hand to cover her breast.

“Yes.”

“Why? Why would you do that?” Lauren had probably never done anything for anyone else in her life. But Melody couldn't say that, that she'd done this for a boy. Even to think it, much less say it aloud—you can't say things like that out loud.

“I wanted to,” Melody said. She reached for her shirt to cover up, and she winced when the fabric rubbed against her nipple.

“It’s bothering you,” Lauren said. She reached past Melody and opened the medicine cabinet. She handed Melody two Aleves. She’d gotten a new job as a pharmaceutical sales rep and this seemed to make her an authority in all things medically-related. “Take these, they’re the only ones that work for me.” Melody took the pills and swallowed them without water.

“Did you do it for—” Lauren paused. “For him?”

“No,” Melody said.

“Ok.” Lauren looked once more at the place on Melody’s breast where the ring pressed against the fabric and left the bathroom. Melody took her shirt back off, stared at herself, had trouble turning away.

Later that week, when she wasn’t ready to go out yet, when she’d taken more Aleves than you’re supposed to take, Dan showed up at the apartment. Lauren wasn’t there. Melody could guess where she was, but she wasn’t lying when she said, “I don’t know.”

They went into the kitchen for a beer and leaned against the cabinets. They both stared at their bottles, as if the labels had interesting things to say.

“I wonder where Lauren’s got to,” Dan said. Melody took a sip of beer. “She’s hard to pin down sometimes.” Melody nodded. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Are you hard to pin down?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said. She stood up straight, as if whatever Dan was accusing her of could be fixed by the way she held herself.

“Is that why you left your boyfriend?” Melody had told Lauren this when she’d first moved in, not wanting to seem so desperate as she felt. They hadn’t talked about it since, though. She could imagine Lauren in bed with Dan, whispering about her: Melody stays in her room all the time, there’s this bass player who doesn’t give a shit about her, you won’t believe what she did for him.

“I didn’t leave my boyfriend,” Melody said. She put down her empty bottle on the counter—hard enough so that the glass hit the granite with a pop. Dan jerked at the noise, and she was glad.

“I guess I heard differently,” he said. He seemed then to look at her breast, as if he even knew which one it was, but then his eyes were back on his beer so quickly she wondered if she’d imagined the whole thing.

“He left me.” Melody opened the fridge for another beer. She didn’t offer one to Dan.

“Oh,” Dan said. She thought he might apologize. She didn’t know if she expected it or wanted him to. It didn’t matter, though, because he didn’t say anything at all. He was still staring so intently at his beer. She felt bad for him, as if she was the one who needed to say she was sorry.

“Sometimes it’s better when it’s over,” she said. She leaned back against the counter, and she and Dan watched an ant crawling across, making slow progress. It was maybe a scout, and Melody knew she should kill it, before it brought in the whole colony, before she poured a bowl of cereal and ate a few bites only then to discover their little black bodies swirling in the milk. But she watched it feel its way across the surface,

tentatively searching out food. She and Dan stood this way, silently, watching, until he reached out, pressing his thumb onto the counter, pressing down where the ant had been.

After the tender skin around the piercing healed to a dull pink, Melody went to one of the bass player's shows. She whispered in his ear and he took her home that night. And when he finally saw it, pulled it gently with his teeth, she breathed in quickly, the sharp sting of it catching her off guard. And she thought how this was all building up to this unrecognizable pulse in some kind of life she'd never anticipated, and really just because it was her first piercing didn't mean it was his.

For a while, the bass player wanted to see her, often. He'd take her home from gigs. He wouldn't look at anyone else. One night, he invited Melody to his apartment for what he said was a small party, just some guys playing guitars and hanging out. It was that way for awhile; she sat next to him on the sofa while he played the guitar—he wasn't only a bass player, it turned out—and she felt happy, as if maybe after everything, he might end up sticking, for awhile at least. The overhead lights—bulbs without fixtures—were turned off so that the only source of light came from the soft glow of a table lamp and the orange papery burning of joints lit up. He handed one to her and smiled.

"I'm glad you're here," he said. She took it.

She kept her leg pressed against his, and he didn't move away. She listened to the music—it was softer here, and she lay her head against the back of the sofa, and let herself be washed away. At some point, she was aware that he wasn't touching her anymore, that she was alone on the sofa.

She tried to stand up, but the party had started growing, first just small groups of twos and threes but adding up until it was uncomfortable to move, until you couldn't just be—you were always touching or bumping somebody. She pushed her way through the apartment. She couldn't find the bass player, and she didn't know anybody else. She walked home, expecting to hear from him. She lay awake, staring at her phone, thinking it might at any moment ring.

The next day, he called and left a message: "Where did you go?" She didn't return it, it was enough that he'd called, but he continued throughout the week. When she did finally call back—because she was always going to—he actually sounded hurt.

"You just left," he said.

"I couldn't find you."

"I was there."

"Ok," she said. She looked around the apartment. Lauren had thrown herself wholeheartedly into her new job—thrilled still by the perks of a company car and a reason to wear high heels everyday—and there were boxes of samples lining the entryway. Melody had the urge to open them up, take whatever was inside.

"Are you going to come out tonight?"

"I'll think about it," she said. She hung up the phone and opened one of the boxes with a steak knife; the little packets inside were bright pink and blue. She stared at them, wondering if what was inside might dissolve on her tongue, if she'd have to bite through a coating, if the pills would take effect immediately, what that effect might be. She taped the box shut again.

When Lauren came home a few hours later and flung herself onto the couch, kicking off her high heels, Melody was already dressed to go out.

“Look at you,” Lauren said.

“I need to get out. There’s a band playing.” Lauren raised one eyebrow.

“The bass player?” she asked. Melody didn’t say anything as she stood in front of the mirrored hallway closet and put on another coat of mascara. “Maybe I should come with you.”

“You’ll be bored.”

“Is there a bar?” Melody nodded. “I won’t be bored.” Lauren sat up on the couch. “Shit, Dan’s supposed to come over.” Melody hadn’t seen Dan for a few weeks now. She didn’t know what this could mean.

“Bring him along.”

“He always wants to stay in,” Lauren said. But an hour later, the three of them were squeezed in tight next to the bar, while the bass player’s band was setting up on stage. He hadn’t noticed Melody yet. He should be able to sense her there. She tried not to look his way too often; surely he was looking at her in the moments when she wasn’t looking at him. Dan managed to order them three beers. Lauren held the bottle away from her body, as if she had no idea what might be inside, but then she downed it all in four swigs.

“Is he going to come over here?” Lauren asked, nodding her head toward the stage.

“Who?” Dan asked. The music kept getting louder, as if someone at that moment was turning up the dial.

“Her boyfriend,” Lauren shouted over the music.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Melody said.

“The bass player?” Dan asked, bending his neck closer to her. It was becoming increasingly hard to hear—the dial was turning up and up—and Melody didn’t know why Lauren and Dan were here and she didn’t want them here, and if the bass player was going to ignore her—which he’d been doing well so far—she didn’t want them to see it.

“No,” Melody said, loudly.

“Get me another drink?” Lauren asked Dan. “I need to find the ladies’ room.”

Dan got the beer and he and Melody made their way to a corner, where they could at least push out their elbows and not hit anyone.

“We’ve never all done this before,” Dan said, leaning in close to her ear.

“This?”

“Gone out.” Dan was holding Lauren’s beer. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Lauren’s hot pink top. She was flirting with some guy in a suit near the bar. Melody could hear Lauren’s high-pitched laugh over every other sound in the bar—every glass clanging and every heel stomping and every other high-pitched laugh—and she wished the band would just start playing. She glanced at Dan, and he was staring into his beer, either not hearing Lauren, or good at pretending not to. Onstage, the bass player still wouldn’t look at her.

“I need to ask you something,” Melody said.

“Ok.” And he brought his face even closer to hers, and she could smell the beer and aftershave or maybe just soap, here where there were people bumping into them and spilling beers and yelling and the drummer counting off.

“You know what Lauren’s doing, right?”

“She went to the bathroom,” Dan said.

“No,” Melody said. “You *know*.” Dan stepped away from her, as if she had touched him, as if she burned. The band started playing and all she could hear was bass.

“Whatever it is you want to say,” Dan said, “I don’t want you to.”

“Just tell me you know.”

“I’m not going to talk about this.”

“It’s not easy for me to bring up either.”

“Are you actually doing this?” Dan asked. “*You?*”

Back to this question of who she’d done it for. Why she did it at all. Melody wanted to tell him it wasn’t the same, she hadn’t made the same kind of compromises, but before she could say any of this, Lauren came back and took the beer from Dan’s hand.

“They’re awful,” Lauren shouted.

“They’re fine,” Dan said. Lauren looped her arm around Dan’s and tried to get him to look at her, to smile with her, to agree that yes, she was right, this band was god awful. But he wouldn’t. She turned to Melody for support, but Melody wouldn’t make eye contact.

“What the fuck, guys?” Lauren asked.

“I want to leave,” Dan said.

“We just got here,” Lauren looked back and forth between Dan and Melody.

“What’s going on?” She sounded nervous. Melody shouldn’t have said anything. What would it accomplish anyway? She couldn’t put up with a big scene from Lauren.

Dan put down his beer and started for the door, but Lauren grabbed his sleeve.

“Don’t go.”

“I’m tired of this.” Dan pulled his arm away and made for the door as Lauren teetered after him. She caught him near the entrance, and pressed him against a wall, whispering into his ear. He held her body back from his with his arm. He wouldn’t look at her face. But he was letting her continue to talk, to beg, if Melody could guess.

Melody turned back to the band, closed her eyes, and listened for the bass player. She couldn’t hear him. And when she opened her eyes, his were shut. Lauren tapped her on the shoulder.

“We’re going.” Dan was standing near the door with his hands in his pockets.

“You’re ok?” Melody nodded. He hadn’t told her, then, why he wanted to leave. Not yet, at least. Melody hoped he would, once they were out of the bar, once they could speak to each other and be heard.

After they left, Melody leaned against a wall, and the music started pounding into her head and she couldn’t distinguish any of the sounds and she felt like throwing up. The bass player—backed by the stage lights behind him—shook his head back and forth and beads of sweat pulsed out and onto the people in the front row, who were jumping up and down, knocking hard against each other. Melody pushed her way to the bathroom and

kneeled in front of the toilet, but nothing came up. She held a damp paper towel against her neck for a few minutes and decided to order another beer at the bar, thinking it might cool her off. But it just muted everything. She drank it slowly, letting the feeling, the dulling, wash over her. The bar was even more crowded than when she'd gotten there and it was hot and she fought her way outside where the air felt cleaner. Earlier, she'd expected to wait for the bass player to finish his set, to go back home with him. But the thought of all the effort that would require just made her tired.

She started walking home, along the edge of the park. The air felt good on her still-radiating-heat skin. She could cut a good ten minutes out of the walk if she cut through. The streetlamps extending into the park seemed to fizzle out the further in she looked, at which point all was dark. But she just wanted to be home, in her bed, all of this gone away. She crossed the street, hopped the low stone wall, and entered the woods. It was quiet; the trees muffled the noise of the cars. She found the footpath and made her way west. The lull of the woods made a welcome contrast to the throbbing pulse of the bar. Away from the bass player, she had no idea why she went there in the first place, what she was expecting of him.

It was when she could just make out the stoplight in front of her apartment through a break in the trees—the changing colors that shone into her bedroom at night—that she realized she didn't have her purse with her. She could see it, back at the bar, sitting on the vanity of the bathroom, soaking in soapy water. No doubt it was gone now, and even if it wasn't, she didn't think she could walk all that way back.

After the final stretch through the park and across the street to her building, she pressed the buzzer, over and over, leaning into it. Her keys had been in her purse. She hoped it was Lauren who would answer. She would be distraught, likely, and she might be mad. But at least it would mean that Dan had gone home, that this wasn't all just going to blow over. After several minutes, a bit of static came through the speaker followed by a voice. It was Dan's.

He met her at the apartment door, and he stood in the doorway and she stood just outside.

"I lost my purse," she said. "I think I left it at the bar."

Dan stood still for a moment—she couldn't read his face in the dark, she wasn't sure he would let her in, he might keep standing there forever—then moved out of the doorway so that she could enter.

"Do you want to go back for it?" he asked.

"Not now." She lay out on the couch and stared up at the ceiling. She was trying not to cry. Horizontal like this, keeping her eyes open, feeling the air drying her out, it was somehow easier to control. Dan sat in the armchair next to her.

"I would walk with you," he said.

"It doesn't matter." The act of going back would mean more than anything inside the purse. "I shouldn't have gone tonight in the first place."

"I didn't want to say it."

The flickering glow from the stoplight outside cut through a gap in the blinds. Their faces lit up in the dark—alternating red, yellow, green—again and again.