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The stories in *As Strong As I Was* involve characters who are struggling with their identities as fathers and daughters as well as their responsibilities to the people they call family.

AS STRONG AS I WAS

by

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Sbalordito

Attilio met them at Space Electronique, a discotheque popular with Americans studying abroad. He was the bartender. Polaroids of him hung behind the bar, his arm around one girl or another, lips planted on her cheek while she beamed at the camera as if to say *I love this country*. They couldn't speak Italian very well. They asked him to trill *r*'s in words never meant to be trilled. Sometimes he'd have sex with them in the storage closet, their pelvises balancing on a case of Peroni. Other times he woke up in 15th century villas chopped into dorm rooms. He never invited them home because he lived with his father. He was a widower who would admire his son's romantic conquests but the girls didn't understand why a man would still live at home well into his thirties.

They had the best intentions of becoming fluent in Italian during their semesters. They insisted on banning English from their dates with him. They had no trouble ordering another round or asking for the bill, but when they tried to describe their life goals and what made them vulnerable, their vocabulary fell short: they said things like "I want to be a *studentessa di Medici*" when they really meant *studentessa di medicina*. He didn't tell them the Medici were an Italian dynasty and instead changed the subject. He spoke only in present tense and asked them what they liked about Rome. They all liked the same things: pizza, the Pietà, dining al fresco in a piazza. Their Italian never improved. He would switch to English, but they gradually lost interest in talking to him

in either language. They thanked him for an affair to remember, or just stopped calling, as if he ceased to exist.

Attilio got older but the girls stayed twenty-two. It wasn't as much fun as his married brothers thought it must be. He stopped fucking girls in the storage room because he'd notice mouse droppings collecting in the corners, stopped waking up in 15th century villas after the morning he opened his eyes to a collage of puppies and male Calvin Klein models taped to the walls. But he liked to think back on those few first exchange students, when he was their age and had no idea what was coming next in life. He remembered their last names: Booth, Cho, MacDonald, Herman. He found them on Facebook.

Booth was the curator of a repertory film festival. Cho had three kids. MacDonald was in a band that opened for Radiohead, twice. Herman was a human rights lawyer. Attilio was a bartender. Still. He wanted to believe it was the girls who were holding him back.

Running a bar was all he knew, but he knew how to do it well. Attilio quit Space Electronique to open his own place. It was much smaller than the discotheque, with room for only ten stools around the bar. Customers could also sit at one of the eight distressed, wooden tables that he'd found at consignment shops. The tables wobbled a bit, but the floorboards were warped, so everything came into balance somehow and drinks didn't spill. They sat no more than three or four people each. A ledge beneath the large window served as a seat for two more people. He lined it with cushions that he had

covered with a fabric that matched the curtains his mother sewed for their windows when he was a child.

He banned from his jukebox the sort of Europop played at Space Electronique by filling it with jazz and blues standards. The discotheque's customers had liked mixed drinks, but they liked them cheap. Attilio now had a proper top shelf for quality liquor. He dusted the bottles every other day, from the Belvedere's etched glass to the Maker's Mark bottleneck rimmed with dripping wax. He painted the walls a red that made the place warm and homey. He kept the lights low, but bright enough for someone to read a newspaper at the bar because that's the type of customer he wanted. The walls of Space Electronique had peeling black paint, the light an epileptic strobe.

He hung a topographic map of Italy behind the bar and drew a heart round Rome with a tube of lipstick one girl or another had left on the bar. He named his place Mappamondo.

Business was slow for the first few weeks, but he was hopeful. It was April, warm enough to keep the double doors open to the street, and from Attilio's perch at the bar he could see pedestrians slowing their gait to throw a glance his way. Their eyes circled the storefront like singling out a want ad in the newspaper, perhaps making a mental note of the bar's name. His brothers came by often after work before they went home to their wives and children. They expected free drinks, which of course Attilio provided, but when they pointed to the top shelf he shook his head. With the lease he just signed for Mappamondo, he couldn't just give away the good stuff. They understood, but it made it easier for them to criticize the jukebox selections and the beers on tap.

But it was women who came in more often than men. Women in twos or threes, carrying designer messenger bags or department store bags or even grocery bags, a cocktail the final item on their shopping lists. They sipped their drinks languidly, as if these groceries were for tomorrow's meal, not tonight's, as if time stood still when they entered Mappamondo, and their perishables wouldn't spoil or melt.

One evening, two women sat together at one end of the bar. They wore their hair in tight ponytails and jewel-encrusted wedding bands on their fingers and talked about their children. Attilio uncorked a bottle of Pinot Grigio before they even asked. As he finished pouring their drinks, a woman who was undeniably not Italian walked into Mappamondo.

She had coarse, curly red hair that circled her head like a halo. It was the kind of hair she must have been teased unrelentingly about when she was a kid but as an adult made her so striking it would be tragic if she wore it any other way. Freckles stood out in scores on her skin. The shape of her arms revealed she lifted weights regularly, and her torso funneled toward a trim waist, but the fullness in her rear end and thighs was less defined. Her soft body distinguished her from the throngs of stick-figured native women that most other men desired—bodies like ribbons unfurled and held taut.

“*Ciao*,” she greeted with a half laugh, as if she remembered a joke that she wanted to tell him. She put her purse on a stool at the center of the bar and remained standing.

She was not the first American to enter Mappamondo. He'd had a few tourists trickle in, looking weary but content after a day of sightseeing. Some bypassed

sightseeing altogether to spend a lazy day drinking. His place was too new to be listed in the guidebooks, so he wasn't quite sure how they decided upon it. He even got a few exchange students who came in with textbooks and drank a beer while doing homework. They kept to themselves except for when they paid and thanked Attilio. These were the kind of students who probably held as much disdain for Space Electronique as he did.

Attilio put a coaster in front of the woman and nodded. "Hello. What would you like?" he asked in English.

She hesitated and drew a bit back from the bar, perhaps embarrassed that her ethnicity was so easy to uncover. "Dewar's, *per favore*," she said. "*Col ghiaccio.*"

He grabbed the bottle of whiskey from the top shelf. It was good of her to speak Italian, but *col ghiaccio*—on the rocks—was jargon that every exchange student knew.

Still, she didn't look like she was young enough to be in college. She could have been anywhere between thirty and forty. Her hair was a shade or two more vibrant than what was probably her true red. The delicate skin beneath her eyes looked a bit too bright, as if she used a special makeup to hide dark circles. She wore no wedding ring, but on her middle finger was a chunky, silver band—something modestly extravagant, as if she had the means to buy it for herself. Her blue jeans fit her body well and showed off her curves. Finding the perfect pair of jeans was something that was ingrained in an Italian woman's upbringing, but most young foreigners had no idea how to dress themselves.

He placed her drink on the bar. "*Salut.*"

She sat down and smiled. "*Grazie.*" She opened her bag and pulled out a leather-bound appointment book along with a map of Rome. With one finger she traced the path of the Metro while writing something next to an address in her book.

He heard the tinny chime of one of the other women's wedding bands tapping against an empty wine glass. Attilio brought them the bottle of Pinot Grigio. They did not look at him, nor thank him, as he refilled their glasses. Instead they spoke about the redheaded foreigner, speculating that she was an American tourist whose husband had left her for a young blond, and she was in Italy to reclaim her sexuality. That jab gave way to a story that had been in the news for weeks, about an exchange student who was accused of killing her roommate in a sex game gone wrong. The latest gossip: the girl had been seen shopping for lingerie the day after the murder.

Attilio glanced at the redhead. Her pen had paused mid-script. She was listening. He left the bottle with the women.

"I'm sorry," he said to her quietly so the other women wouldn't overhear. "Please, do not pay attention to that, and enjoy yourself." He preferred a local clientele, yes, but he wouldn't stand for rudeness.

She pursed her lips. "*Abito a Livorno,*" she said to him. "*Non sono un turista.*"

She lived in Livorno. All he knew about the city was that it was home to a military complex.

"*Sei nei militari?*"

The women had stopped talking and were staring at Attilio. He asked them if they needed anything else. They shook their heads, knocked back their wine, lay a few Euro on the bar and left.

Yes, those women were insufferable, but he could empathize. There was no such thing as a quiet side street anymore, no such area a tourist wasn't willing to explore, thanks to guidebooks that promised off-the-beaten-path vacations. But he certainly couldn't turn down a paying customer when Mappamondo was still in its infancy, what with that lease he had signed.

She looked down at her drink. "*Mi dispiace*," she apologized. She took a large swig of her Dewar's, draining most of it. Moist marks from her pale pink lipgloss rimmed the glass. He poured another drink for her before pouring one for himself.

"This one is on me," he said, "because of those women." He raised his glass to hers. "*Salut*," he said.

She smiled. "*Salut*."

Her name was Alyson. In patches of Italian peppered with English, she told him she worked for the Girl Scouts of America, organizing troops and activities for daughters of military families on bases throughout Europe. She was from New York City, but she'd been working in Belgium for six months before being recently transferred to Italy. She was in Rome for a week and had never been there before. So one could argue, she said, that she was indeed a tourist.

"And my Italian is not very good," she admitted, abandoning the language and looking discouraged for doing so.

“It’s better than you think,” Attilio said. He detected the scent of watermelon coming from her—not that of a true watermelon, but of the manufactured kind, unmistakable to gum and candy.

Alyson’s cheeks flushed. She slowly rocked her glass back and forth, making the ice cubes rattle against each other. The sound comforted Attilio, as if it promised that Mappamondo would one day soon be livelier, busier. A few more customers had arrived and gathered at the tables, but they were speaking in low voices. No one was even playing music on the jukebox. A few browsed the selections before losing interest. They approached the bar one by one to buy a drink, as if they were at a butcher shop waiting for their numbers to be called.

“I would like to know, please,” Attilio said, “why did you choose this bar for a drink?”

Alyson looked around the bar, grinning as her eyes swept over a framed collage of *lire* that he never exchanged for Euro. “You’re near the Ghetto wall,” she said. “My mother wanted me to take a picture of it, to show to friends at her synagogue.”

“Ah, you are Jewish,” he said.

“Raised that way, yes.”

“You need to try *carciofi alla giudìa*. I do not know what they are called in English, but it is a famous Roman Jewish food.” He could smell them cooking in the afternoons as he prepped the bar. They reminded him of something similar his mother had made. Hers had been stuffed with seasoned breadcrumbs and sweet *soppressata*.

“Artichokes,” Alyson said. “Fried artichokes. I’ll try them while I’m here.”

“Artichokes,” Attilio repeated slowly. The syllables sputtered like an old car but still made his mouth water. He would never forget that word.

“But also,” Alyson continued, “I came inside because this place looked really nice and inviting.”

He smiled. “Thank you. The bar, she is mine. I am the owner. She’s very new, open three weeks now.” He knew *bar* was a masculine word, but Mappamondo just felt like a daughter to him.

“Really! Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” he repeated. He felt proud to take ownership, to say it out loud.

She returned her map and appointment book to her bag and rested her elbow on the bar, leaning her head into her hand. “*Sei tutta la notte qui?*” she asked, uncurling the fingers on her free hand with each word, as if she was taking inventory of the Italian she knew. When she was out of fingers, she continued in English. “If not, would you like to have dinner with me?”

Attilio looked in his whiskey glass as if searching for an answer. At Space Electronique, a woman would have had to ask him three times before he heard her. The blasting club anthems made speech irrelevant, so he learned how to read lips. Therefore, he’d actually know what she asked the first time, but would pretend not to, until his ears truly picked up her words. It was a way to gauge the woman’s interest in him.

A woman would also have had to grip her small space at the bar so as not to be elbowed out of the way, not to be offended when he abruptly walked off to attend to a customer, not be upset if someone spilled their drink on her while she waited for him to

come back. She would try to stay afloat in the sweat and strobe and smoke, and if she hung on long enough, he would tow her in, when he was ready.

But now, it was only the two of them, without the chaos of Space Electronique to protect him. He thought it would be so easy to say *no* at Mappamondo. But if he did, he would be all alone in the sunlit quiet.

“*Mi dispiace*, I don’t know anyone in Rome,” Alyson said. “I just thought—I’m sorry.”

“No,” he said a little too loudly, because the drinkers at the tables turned their heads. “I mean yes, I am here all night. But tomorrow evening, I have another bartender working, because Sunday nights are the most slow. We could have dinner then?”

She smiled, closed her eyes and nodded. “Sounds wonderful.”

“We will have good wine, I will show you the famous places, *avremo fatto le ore piccole divertendosi*.”

Alyson squinted her eyes open. “We will...make the small hours amusing?”

Attilio laughed as he shook his head. “It must mean something else in English.”

She smiled. “We’ll make a night of it.”

Alyson met him at Mappamondo the next evening, and they walked in a roundabout way to a wine bar so he could show her some of his city. As they neared the Trevi Fountain, Attilio picked up one of the shoeprint-stamped pamphlets that littered the street and recited some facts about the monument. “It is ancient,” he said.

Alyson grabbed the pamphlet and scanned it. “It says it’s 18th century!” she laughed. “That’s no older than the States. It’s not ancient. And if you ask me, it’s gaudy.”

“Gaudy?”

“Ugly.”

It was a world-famous attraction, but something he always took for granted as part of the backdrop. He wondered if she felt the same way about the Statue of Liberty. He examined the fountain. It was just a mishmash of half-naked men and horses sprouting wings. “Gaudy,” he said slowly.

“You don’t need to be my tour guide,” she said. “I have to organize a field trip for the Girl Scouts to see all these things, anyway.”

“So you will return to the city?”

She smiled. “It’s a four-hour train ride, but it’s worth it.”

They continued toward the wine bar. Attilio discussed the dearth of good Italian rock bands and the ubiquity of Roberto Begnini. When he joked that the only novel idea Italy had had since the Renaissance was fascism, she giggled and reached for his jacket cuff. They walked past the Colosseum, haunting in the darkness and spotlights, and he pointed to a cluster of cats peeking through one of its massive holes. That, Alyson said, was the sort of thing she had wanted to see.

She gave him a knowing smile once they were at the bar and he had ordered a bottle. “Do you bring women here often?” she asked. Her lips, glistening with the same lipgloss she had worn at Mappamondo, reflected flickers of candlelight.

Atilio gave a little chuckle and drummed his knuckles on the table. “I meet a lot of women as a bartender,” he admitted. “More at the last place I worked, actually a lot of American women. But not like you. They never remained in Italy.”

“So that explains why you’re single.”

He chuckled again. “Yes, it is.”

Alyson placed her hand on top of his to stop the drumming. “It’s okay, I’m just teasing.” But he didn’t respond because he noticed her hand. It was the hand of a woman much older than she: very dry, with wrinkles like weather-beaten bark. She pulled her hand away.

The sommelier arrived with their first bottle. He presented it with minimal flourish and poured a modest amount into their glasses. After he walked away, Alyson topped off their drinks.

“I am sorry if my relationships make me look like I am a, how do you say, a playboy.” He swirled the wine in his glass and sniffed it, though he never much cared for the drink.

She shook her head. “Not at all. Besides, there’s something exciting and passionate about having a love affair with an expiration date.”

“Expiration date? What is that?”

“To expire. To finish, to come to an end. You know from the beginning that it will end.” She wiped a drop of wine from her lip and slowly applied a new layer of lipgloss, looking very serious as she did so. The scent of synthetic watermelon hit his nose, and now he knew where it came from. He wanted to taste it.

She placed her hand on Attilio's thigh. All he felt was her warmth.

He brought her home that night, creeping quietly past his delicate father asleep in the kitchen with a book in his lap. "He looks so sweet," Alyson whispered. Attilio turned off the kitchen light before taking her to his bedroom. He knew she probably had a nice hotel room, but he wanted to finally be with a woman in his own bed.

Afterward, with their legs coiled, she fell asleep, her body heavy against his. It was late, but on the streets below his window, the bars had only just closed. His mind was not used to shutting down at two in the morning, and so he turned on his clock radio to listen to the news, keeping the volume low. He hoped the reports would distract him from his self-awareness: he was falling into a familiar pattern with another American woman. But the broadcaster's voice was deep, speaking in one note. Attilio heard neither the news nor his own, nagging conscience, and the voice pushed him into sleep.

Alyson was still asleep when he awoke to the sun rising. The light fell across her freckled shoulders. Her skin was so pale that Attilio worried the sun could someday have a detrimental—even lethal—effect on her.

She had to catch an early train back to Livorno, she told him over espresso. She asked for his number and said she would call the next time she was in Rome. He wrote it on the back of another man's business card that she found at the bottom of her purse, his pen catching on a crumb that clung to the card. When he gave it back to her, he noticed her abnormal hands once again, their texture like fish scales. But as she carefully wrote his name above his number and tucked the card into her wallet, he knew he would taste watermelon again.

By early May, Mappamondo had earned what he hoped to call regulars: a cluster of retired men looking to escape home until their stomachs longed for what their wives were preparing for dinner. It was late afternoon, and once again Attilio allowed the sun to fill every corner of the bar. He was pouring a pint of beer for one of the retirees when he heard a chorus of giggles from the street. It was a small group of girls wearing green jumpers. Standing among them was Alyson. She wore a green sash with little patches on it, and he thought it was the funniest thing he'd ever seen. As she waved, the girls made kissing noises. Attilio sauntered to the doorway, leaned against the frame and whistled. "*Ciao, ragazze,*" he said to the pre-teen crowd, exaggerating the trill in his *r*. He blew them a kiss. It made the girls touch their perfect, reddening cheeks, as if they understood what was cooking inside of them. Only then did he look at Alyson, who shook her head at his performance and smiled. He would have invited them in for sodas if he didn't think the uniformed girls would deter other drinkers from entering.

"*Mi chiama,*" he said to Alyson, pantomiming a telephone receiver. But he knew she wouldn't. She'd been to Rome three weekends in a row and always just showed up at Mappamondo like they had a standing date. She nodded and steered the girls away, but not before a few of them got the courage to ask Attilio if they could take his picture.

When it was close to ten o'clock, the bar was filled with people who had abandoned a wedding reception. Roses drooped from lapels and wrists, catching the drops of alcohol their wearers couldn't navigate into their mouths. Attilio mixed a batch of vodka martinis and poured them into a line of chilled glasses. He walked over to the olive tray and flipped it open. Alyson was sitting right next to it.

“*Ciao!*” he said. “When did you get here?” He kissed her, stroking her hand. It was silky, tinged with the scent of camphor. He knew she had taken to working moisturizer into her hands just before meeting up with him.

“*Cinque minuti fa,*” she said. “But you were busy, I didn’t want to interrupt you.”

“I am sorry I did not see you,” he said, gathering olives for the drinks. “That is very silly of me.”

“Don’t worry about it. You have a lot of thirsty customers who want to give you their money.”

Attilio garnished the martinis and pushed them toward the wedding guests. There was a shot or two of martini left in the shaker. He poured it in a tumbler and gave it to Alyson. He assumed the Girl Scouts were now asleep somewhere, but he didn’t want to ask her who was taking care of them, as if the question would make her suddenly remember she had a job to get back to.

“Where is *tua fascia?*” he asked, running his hand diagonally across his chest. She was taking a sip as he asked. It made her laugh into the glass.

“My sash?” she asked. She opened her purse and took it out.

“Wear it!” he said. “You are very sexy in it.”

“I look ridiculous,” she said, putting it on. The patches were silky circles of pictures of things like a bookshelf, a mountain range, a hammer.

It was his busiest night so far, and yet he wished he could close early to take Alyson out for dinner. More than one customer tried to talk to her. They pointed to her sash as if they were asking about her breasts.

The wedding guests pushed aside the tables, and two couples started swing dancing to Duke Ellington on the jukebox. Their sharp heels left dimples in the floor. The people still sitting thudded their fists and glasses against the tables. And soon the bar counter itself was vibrating. The glasses shimmied back and forth in place. The alcohol trembled like it was effervescent. Attilio put his hands on the bar, fearing if it slipped out of his grip it would spin away. He looked at Alyson. She had her hand on her chest like her heart had sped up to the rhythm of the chaos. He let go of the bar and placed his hand on top of hers. *Don't leave me*, he wanted to say. He needed her to tow him back in. He kissed her hard.

There was applause. Attilio thought he felt the bar tremble just a hair or two more. As he broke away from Alyson, Duke Ellington made his exit, and the bar came to rest again.

Alyson helped him close Mappamondo. She gathered empty glasses from the table while he closed out the register. She was still wearing her sash.

“Can you explain some of those?” Attilio asked, nodding toward the patches on the sash.

She looked down at her chest. “A Girl Scout earns badges after she’s completed a set of requirements,” she said. She pointed at one that was a picture of an abacus, calculator and pencil. “This one means I am a genius at math. Or at least, I was. This was my sash when I was a Girl Scout.”

“So you used to be like those little girls in green?”

She grinned. “I was.”

“And you still have to wear this?”

“No, but the girls didn’t want to wear their uniforms today. But my office was insistent on getting a photo of them in front of the Colosseum, in uniform. I wore my old sash so they wouldn’t feel as silly.”

“What is this one?” he asked, stroking the patch. It was the gender symbol for female.

“Women’s stories,” she said. “I had to do things like interview a female role model, and write a story about what the first woman president would be like.”

“You accomplished a lot of things as a Girl Scout.”

Alyson shrugged. “I never thought I’d make a career out of it.”

“Are you coming home with me, or are you returning to the Girl Scouts?” he asked. His question lacked a transition that progressed naturally from the Girl Scouts to his bed. But he was tired. His head was tired of thinking in another language.

But she didn’t seem to mind. “They have their troop leaders. I’m all yours.”

Exhausted as he was, he could not fall asleep. Attilio tuned into talk radio to be his lullaby. The reporter chattered in his ear, a little firmer than usual.

“He keeps saying *terremoto*,” Alyson murmured. He didn’t realize she was still awake. Her eyes were closed and her hair fell over her mouth. A few strands billowed up as she spoke. “What does that mean?” she asked.

He hadn't been paying attention, didn't know why the reporter was talking about a *terremoto*. But he grabbed two slats on his headboard and shook the entire bed. It made Alyson open her eyes wide and brush her hair from her face.

"Oh, *terre*—of course. Earthquake!" she said. "*Terremoto*. Moving earth."

He thought back to the swing dancers, how he'd thought they made the entire bar shake. "Do you remember that knocking at the bar tonight?" he asked. "That was *il terremoto*. But it was far away, two or three hours away."

"Really? I've never been in an earthquake before."

"*Si*. But we were not really in the earthquake. We did not experience it much, but we experienced a little of it. But people were too drunk to notice." He concentrated on the news report. "It destroyed a basilica, many centuries old," he said. "Ancient."

"That's awful." Alyson put her face closer to the radio and cupped her hand around it, as if searching for words she understood. "They say the community was...*sbalordito*?"

It was a feeling that could be good or bad, always unexpected. It could make your body sweat, your heart race. He felt it when he was approved for a loan for Mappamondo after he thought he had no chance, and he felt it when his father told him his mother had died. Attilio didn't know how to translate that.

He pulled her close. "It will be okay," he said. Her hand twitched as she removed it from the radio.

Alyson returned to his city every weekend, but not for the Girl Scouts; she came for him, for them. She introduced Attilio to new restaurants, beginning with a *trattoria* that served *carciofi alla giudia*. She got him to push his fear of heights aside and climb the cupola at St. Peter's. When they kissed, she'd twist a lock of his curly hair with her pinkie finger. She never explained why her hands were the way they were, but he understood it didn't matter, and she must have as well, because she stopped using so much lotion. She stayed awake with him to listen to talk radio and continued to press him for all the new words it revealed. She was speaking better in Italian every day.

They rented a car for a short trip to the Umbrian countryside. The first time away together was always the benchmark in a romance, Alyson explained, though Attilio didn't understand the word *benchmark*. He pieced it together, however: the first evening was still a world of soft-focus lighting where everything was bliss, but come the final morning, Alyson would have a clearer picture of the man she'd been sleeping with. During the drive, she fell for the low orange rooftops, the fields of leafy tomato plants, the rows of olive trees. Each tree was a near-perfect image of the next, their branches reaching a restrained distance.

But Attilio hated the countryside, hated its oversized dragonflies that clipped his ears, the slugs that clung limply onto slate walkways, the inevitable *squish* when his boot met with one hidden in the moss. He couldn't return to his city soon enough, but a flat tire delayed them. He didn't know what to do; he was only used to driving a moped that never suffered from deflated wheels. An American tourist passing by had to help them. He wore a sweatshirt with the word *Cincinnati* across the front, and Attilio pronounced it

chin-chin-atti. Alyson and the American laughed like they were sharing an inside joke and Attilio thought, this is it, here is your *benchmark*, here is your affair to remember. But after the tire was changed and the man said goodbye and Attilio dropped Alyson off at the nearest train to Livorno, she gave him a watermelon kiss, suggested they visit New York City in the fall, and she would see him next weekend. She hurried into the station, a wide-brimmed hat sheltering her from the nascent summer sun. What he was feeling was very new, and he didn't know what to do with it.

One night it was Attilio's turn to fall asleep first, a heavy sleep brought on by a crowded night capped off with Johnnie Walker Blue. He awoke not to the sound of talk radio, but to fingernails clicking on a computer keyboard. Alyson was sitting up in bed, the glow of her laptop illuminating her frown. She was on the internet, searching: *are abortions legal in Italy*.

She looked at him and fidgeted with her hands, fingers turning over fingers, like games children played. They were so dry, shriveled like his mother's on the day of her wake. He imagined Alyson's hands gutting fish, or scooping cottage cheese out of a tub and feeding it to an invalid.

"I can't be a mom," she cried. "Not yet."

He looked past her to a cigar box sitting on the bedside table. Inside were school pictures of his nieces and nephews. He received them every year, but he never knew what to do with them; the stiff, forced portraits were not the children he played soccer with on Easter Sundays. So he put them away, fitting their childhoods neatly into one box. But suddenly the act of filing them away to be forgotten seemed cruel, and he was

ashamed. And yet, he still didn't know what to do with them. He didn't know what to do with a child.

She didn't get out of bed the next morning. He offered to pick her up a coffee, a hearty, American cup of coffee, but she didn't want one. If he spoke in Italian, her forehead would crease, even if he said words she knew and used herself. Sometimes she'd raise a hand to the light coming through the window, slowly flex her fingers before lowering it back to the bed. Attilio wondered if the baby would have her hands.

It was the first day of summer, and the Feast of St. John. Stalls were set up in the piazza in front of St. John's Basilica, selling roasted pig and stewed snails, and the celebrations carried through the streets into nearby districts. Cafés and bars opened early for those Romans who looked for any reason to take a day off. Mappamondo needed to celebrate the Feast of St. John.

"*Mi chiama,*" he said, watching her frown once more. "Please, if you need anything."

The doorways on Mappamondo's block were decorated with luminarias despite it being a day that would see fifteen hours of sunlight. The smells from a falafel truck parked in an alley followed him inside.

Attilio added free credits to his jukebox and shuffled through his collection, but found nothing he wanted to hear. He shook out the cushions of the window seat. He dampened a towel and wiped down the bar, every stool, every table, every chair. He poured ice into the cooler beneath the bar, the cubes cascading into thunder. He sliced

the lemons, sliced the limes, filled the garnish tray with maraschino cherries and olive brine. He dusted the top shelf liquor, straining to reach a slender bottle of grappa before knocking it to the floor. The glass broke into two large chunks, spilling the last few drops of the bitter liquid.

Mappamondo was no longer a place one passed by on the street or entered by chance. It was a destination. People not only remembered the bar's name, but also his own. On the first day of summer, Mappamondo was a destination for businessmen and women with unbuttoned sleeves; for journalists and bloggers with laptop cases held close to their bodies; for people who worked with their hands. He saw the grime in the beds of their fingernails as they reached for their drinks. He thought of Alyson's nails: shiny and filed down to simple beauty, mocking the hands they were attached to.

Alyson's Girl Scout sash hung behind the bar because it was something that compelled customers to linger and discuss. Attilio looked at the patches to see if any of them proved she was capable of being a mother. By midday, he still had not heard from her. He called his father, who said she had still not emerged from the bedroom.

He could take care of both her and the baby. True, she'd have to quit her job, but after the baby, after a while, she could find new work. Or could she? She wasn't an EU citizen, she couldn't just find work like everyone else. So they would have to live on his income. But Mappamondo was still so young, and right now he only took home a bartender's salary. And although he had become so much more than a bartender, in that moment, he knew that's all he was.

She could find work if they were to marry and she became a resident alien, couldn't she? Christ, did he want all that? A year ago all he wanted was his own bar.

He called Alyson's mobile phone. No answer. He took it to mean she had made some firm decision, and he would have to wait until the end of the night to find out what it was.

The evening approached, and a group of children lit the luminarias along the sidewalk. People who didn't take the day off trickled into Mappamondo, even more ready to celebrate than those who had been drinking for hours. Attilio's phone vibrated in his back pocket while he opened a bottle of wine.

It wasn't Alyson. "*Pronto?*" he greeted.

It was a reporter. She worked for the weekly city paper. Of course he was familiar with it, he said, he always had a stack of them at the end of his bar. She told him that the editors had named Mappamondo "Best New Bar." She wanted to stop by during the week with a photographer and interview him. Mappamondo would be featured in the issue week after next.

He wrote their appointment on a cocktail napkin, leaving out the words Best New Bar. The title didn't seem real, and to write it felt like he was playing a joke on himself.

Still, "Best New Bar" would bring so much publicity, so many new customers. Maybe even a write-up in Rome travel guides. He imagined his income increasing steadily. As soon as he hung up with the reporter, he began to dial Alyson.

But Attilio hesitated before he finished pressing the numbers. He glanced around the room. Among the crowd, there was a group of men quibbling at the jukebox over

what songs to choose. A young couple licked their fingers after finishing the falafel they'd bought at the cart in the alley. A retired man was trying to flirt with an American girl, who brushed him off.

Attilio put his cell phone away. He leaned in close to a man who sat at the corner of the bar by himself, scribbling in a notebook filled with handwriting. Attilio had seen him there before, and wondered if he was writing a book. The man always came in alone. In something not much louder than a whisper, Attilio told him the good news.

The man put down his pen and smiled. "*Bravo!*" he said. He quickly got up and stood with his feet on the bottom rung of the stool so he was a head or two taller than everyone else. He placed his hand on Attilio's shoulder for balance.

"*Scusi, signori!*" the man shouted to the other customers, slapping his hand on the bar to get their attention. Attilio never even knew this man had a voice; he always ordered a bottle of Budweiser by pointing at it. Now, the quietest customer he had was announcing the new title Mappamondo had earned.

Everyone cheered and applauded with what foreigners might laud as Italian passion. They all had something to do with Mappamondo's success. Attilio held back tears and twisted a towel lightly in his hands beneath the counter where they couldn't see.

His father was still awake when he made it home in the middle of the night. The TV was on and tuned to American sitcoms dubbed in Italian. His father didn't understand American humor, so Attilio knew he was waiting up for him. The old man

said nothing as he stood in the doorway, but gave a sad smile, pressed his hands together like he was praying and shook them once or twice. Alyson was no longer there.

He fell onto his bed with his clothes and shoes still on. Alyson's overnight bag was gone. Her laptop was gone. Her toothbrush and tampons and hair gel were gone. The drawer he'd cleared for her was empty. The last thing he thought of before he crashed into sleep was that he never did get her address in Livorno. He wouldn't be able to return her Girl Scout sash.

He slept until it was nearly time to open Mappamondo the next day. As he made his way toward his best new bar, he saw a flyer for Space Electronique pasted to a lamppost. It was written entirely in English, no Italian artifice about it. They knew their clientele.

As Strong As I Was

My mom once told me to stay away from guys with neck tattoos. A man who chooses to tattoo his neck does not have a good grip on logical thought. I chose not to take her advice when a man with a neck tattoo spoke to me.

I was in the coffeehouse on Haddon Avenue, the one where boys from my high school performed at open mic nights, usually songs by bands that were represented by stickers on their guitar cases. But this was the middle of the day, and those boys were off working summer jobs. The coffeehouse was nearly empty. The man with a neck tattoo was sitting three tables away with two textbooks open in front of him, but he was wagging his pencil in my direction. I was drinking iced tea and working on a crossword puzzle, trying to come up with a five-letter word that meant *unstressed vowel sound*.

“I’ll bet you’ve got some fierce upper body strength,” he said.

“What?” I asked. His tattoo was of the sun: a yellow circle on the side of his neck. Red and orange beams radiated from it and spilled to his shoulders, visible beneath his tank top. My mother hated seeing men in tank tops.

He nodded toward the left wheel of my chair. “You develop lots of muscles in your arms from getting yourself around. Like those guys who play Murderball.”

I was wearing a thin sweater over my t-shirt, because I was always too cold in places with air conditioning, so he couldn’t tell if I had muscles or not. I put aside my crossword.

“You have to be disabled in both your upper and lower body to play quad rugby,” I said. “Like, your spinal cord has to be injured at least at the level of your cervical vertebrae.”

“Down by your cervix?” he asked. “But those Murderball players are dudes.”

Nobody had ever referred to my cervix before. “The cervical vertebrae are up around your neck,” I said.

“Oh.” He eyed me as if looking for where I was broken. “Is your spinal chord injured?”

“Yes. The second nerve of my sacral chord.” When your body isn’t normal, you can talk about its abnormality as clinically as a doctor.

“Where’s that?”

“Down near my tailbone. I have some feeling in my legs.”

He nodded. “Can I ask what happened?”

“Car accident.”

“Cool,” he said, but winced as he realized it was a totally inappropriate response. I actually found it funny, but I didn’t let on. I wanted him to feel bad for a few moments.

“But you must still be strong on top, right?” he continued. “You could probably beat a guy at arm wrestling.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Want to try?” He closed his textbooks and moved them to the next table. They were thick, with artists’ names on the spines. He opened his palm toward me. There was a praying angel inked onto his forearm. The lines creating her face were so fine and

intricate, it was like the artist had in mind what she was praying about when she drew her.

“Seriously? I’m sure you’d win,” I said.

He moved to my table and sat across from me. “Won’t know until you try. Give it a go.”

I didn’t know why a guy with neck tattoos would want to challenge a fifteen-year-old girl in a wheelchair to arm wrestling. But I didn’t think he was a predator or anything like that. I think he was just curious. I was his first handicapped girl.

I pushed up my sleeve and put my elbow on the table. He clasped my hand in his, but not before sweeping his thumb across the calluses on my palm: the consequences of wheeling myself through life at so many revolutions per minute. This plucked a nerve in my inner thigh, one I’d never discovered before. It seemed so distant, like something disappearing on the horizon, and I nearly asked him, *did you feel that?*

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Marianne.”

“Hi Marianne, I’m Nick. Ready?”

I nodded.

“Cool. On three,” he said. “One, two—”

My face contorted into something ugly as I drove all of my strength into his palm. His eyes widened as he pushed back, acknowledging the good deal of resistance he was up against.

“Damn, girl,” he chuckled, “you’re gonna make me work for this.”

I leaned forward to throw as much weight into my arm as I could, careful not to let my elbow rise from the table. Nick lost his advantage by maybe a centimeter. He shifted his stance, and then our hands were locked in place and trembling.

Chairs groaned against the floor as people moved them. They were watching us. “Look at that girl’s bicep,” a woman said. I had seen her when I first arrived. She was holding hands with a guy across her own table, but in a very different way than this.

Sweat formed beneath my breasts and slithered down my ribs. That plucked another nerve in me, somewhere closer to my pelvis. Nick clamped his lower lip with his teeth, as if trying to keep his grin contained, but it didn’t help. His strength gave way, and my arm pinned his on the table. There was cheering. I’d forgotten we weren’t alone, but there was the barista, a man in the corner reading a newspaper, and the couple holding hands. All applauding.

“Great job,” Nick said.

I knew he let me win. My upper body strength may have been more developed than an average girl’s, but Nick knew, the second my hand was in his, I was no athlete.

“Thanks,” I said. I pulled my hand away. His palm glistened with the sweat we’d created.

“Try me,” said the man sitting with the woman. She looked at him, surprised. Her legs were crossed at her knees as well as at her ankles, coiled like snakes. If she stood, those legs might have traveled on forever.

I looked at Nick. I felt like I needed his permission, or maybe his approval. He shrugged and stood, offering his chair to the man.

“Okay, I guess,” I said.

“Let’s make it interesting,” the man said as he sat at my table. He displayed a five-dollar bill.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure I could win a second time.” This new guy was bigger than Nick, at least in his arms. He and his long-legged girlfriend probably worked out together.

“I’ll spot you,” said Nick. “You’ve got nothing to lose.”

“Alright,” I said.

The man held out his palm for a handshake. “I’m Pauly.”

Pauly let me win. And then Trevor, the barista, let me win. And then two men who came into the coffeehouse when I was arm wrestling Pauly let me win. It was as if they had an unspoken rule to hand the victory over to the crippled girl and never let on that they threw the match. But I saw it on their faces, and felt it in their quivering grips, that they never expected me to be as strong as I was, and maybe in the not-so-distant future, I could destroy them. They had more faith in that coming true than I did. But for now, every match ended with me pushing their arms to the table, and my whole body shuddered, even the parts that couldn’t move, and the parts they couldn’t see.

An hour later, I had won thirteen dollars. As I counted my money, I snuck a look at Pauly’s girlfriend. She had slipped her hand underneath her shirt to act like she was scratching an itch, but I could tell she was really checking to see how big her bicep was.

Nick sat across from me again. I tried to give him the five-dollar bill I’d won from Pauly, but he shook his head. “You keep it; you earned it.”

I put the money in the belt bag I wore around my waist. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” he said.

“Did it hurt when you got your tattoos?”

“Some,” he said, looking at his praying angel. “Some spots hurt more than others.”

“Like your neck?” I asked.

“Yeah, that wasn’t too much fun. But the pain, it’s all relative.”

“What do the tattoos feel like on your arm?”

“Just feels like skin.” He extended his arm. “Go ahead and feel it.”

I traced my finger around the black outline of the angel’s wings. I’d thought it would feel raised, like something embossed.

“Lots of people who don’t have tattoos,” he said, “they think they can just go up to you and touch yours.”

I quickly pulled my hand away. “I’m sorry.”

“Not at all,” Nick said. “I said you could, it’s cool.” He positioned his arm on the table. “One more time?”

Nick made me fight during that last match. Tendons protruded beneath my skin. The wings of his angel fluttered. I breathed heavily in and out of my nose, even grunting once or twice. That’s when Dad walked into the coffeehouse.

“What the hell’s going on here?” Dad asked, but since I wasn’t looking at him, I didn’t know if he was asking Nick or me.

Nick's right hand remained locked in mine, but he raised his left to greet my dad. "I'm Nick," he said. "You wanna go next?"

"This is my daughter."

Nick's hand went limp in mine. "Oh hey, you're Marianne's old man? She's got one hell of a grip."

Dad looked at me. I realized then that his question had been directed toward me. I placed my hands in my lap.

"Get your things," he said. "We're going."

"All I have is my crossword magazine."

I had moved it at some point, and it was beneath Nick's heavy books. Dad shoved them aside with one hand, and his other dragged the magazine until it hung over the edge of the table an inch. He secured the magazine with his four fingers, like they were a butterfly paperclip, before switching it over to his other hand. He picked it up this way because he had no thumb.

Nick noticed the pink lump of scar tissue that hugged the stump of bone my dad was left with. "Jesus," he muttered. His gaze settled on the push handles that rose behind my shoulders.

I was going to say something to Nick—what, I didn't know, but I had every desire to say something—when Dad took hold of my handles and pulled me away from the table.

"Hey! HEY!" I hollered. But he didn't let go until he had pushed me out of the coffeehouse and onto the sidewalk.

“You’re not supposed to do that!” I cried. “You can’t move me without my permission! That’s the rule!”

He handed me my magazine and I snatched it away. “I know, I’m sorry,” he said. “But that guy was taking advantage of you.”

“How so? He let me win!”

“Great. And what do you think he expects in exchange?”

“Nothing! Other guys let me win too, even when we were playing for money.”

“Criminy, just what were you doing in there?” Dad used to swear all the time, but my mom got on his case so much about it that he weaned himself off it. He even used to pay me a quarter every time he said a bad word. But now, I hated his substitutions for swearing. It was far more embarrassing to hear a man who was barely forty say things like *criminy* and *merciful heavens* instead of *motherfucker*.

“I thought you were meeting your girlfriends there,” he said. He took a few steps on the sidewalk until I got the hint and wheeled alongside him.

“They were busy.” But I’d made no plans to meet anyone at the coffeehouse; I’d just told Dad to leave me there while he went in to the office for a couple hours. The kids I’d known since I was little had gradually separated themselves from me ever since the accident because they didn’t quite know what to make of my wheelchair. It was easier to make friends with people who never once saw me as someone who could walk. But it was summer. Those friends were at the pool, or on vacation, or working for the first time.

When we reached Dad's minivan, he pressed a button on his keychain. The back passenger door slid open and a ramp slowly lowered to the ground. I wheeled myself onto the ramp. Dad's hands fidgeted, fighting the urge to confirm that I'd applied my brakes and was centered on the platform. These were things I was perfectly capable of doing myself, but I knew that double-checking was just something he needed to do.

"All set?" he mumbled. He rubbed his phantom thumb against his beard.

Dad didn't always drive a maroon, wheelchair-accessible minivan. He used to have a sporty coupe with a sunroof. He was driving it the night of the accident, when I was eleven. Our accident. His eyes never left the road, he would tell my mother for months to come.

"You lose your legs—your ability to climb mountains—and all he loses is a thumb. A *thumb!*" My mom would say this kind of thing when she'd take me to appointments with my physical therapist. I would lie on an exam table, my legs splayed while the therapist loosened my muscles. Mom would pull the collar of her sweater clear over her mouth and cry. It looked like a snake was swallowing her.

Mom and Dad had begun dating in high school, making me believe that it worked that way for nearly everyone. Finding love would be easy. Chasing boys at recess was how it would begin. Passing notes during class would be another step toward lifelong courtship, and this romance would someday culminate at the high school prom. One of those boys would have his arms around me as we slow danced, and I'd be so smitten I'd get weak in the knees.

But my mother couldn't get past what happened, and Dad didn't know how to make things right again. He moved out, and I visited him at his new home one weekend a month and two weeks during the summer.

Dad's townhouse was only a three-minute drive from the coffeehouse on Haddon Avenue. Walking distance. I could have made it to the coffeehouse on my own if it hadn't been for one thing: Dad's front stoop. Three steep steps led to the door, and I was dependent on him to get me in and out of the house.

But he gave me the biggest bedroom, because it was on the ground floor. It had its own bathroom, where he installed a seat in the shower, handrails on either side of the toilet, and a sink and mirror that would be the right height for me in my chair. He also filled the cupboard beneath the kitchen sink with glasses, plates, silverware and snacks, so I wouldn't need his help when I was hungry or thirsty. Because of this, I never complained to my mom about Dad not having a ramp for the front door. She'd just lament some more over how I could no longer climb mountains to avoid acknowledging the everyday things I'd also never get to do. I didn't think I'd care so much about climbing mountains if she hadn't kept bringing it up.

Dad maneuvered my chair up the front steps into the house. "I need to answer a few work emails, then I'll get started on dinner," he said. "You need anything?" He looked at my push handles, just like Nick had once he saw Dad's mangled hand. Dad never looked me in the eye.

"I'm fine," I said.

He nodded and headed upstairs to parts unknown. I was too old for him to be carrying me, so I'd never been up there. I imagined his room to be a mess: bed unmade and clothes on the floor. The contents of his pockets scattered on his dresser at the end of every day: grocery lists, work ID, gas receipts. The business card of his therapist, so he could call to cancel an appointment as soon as the desire struck him. A casino chip for the next time he went to Atlantic City. A guitar pick, because he always wanted to learn how to play. And a nail file. The nails on his bad hand were meticulously kept, while his good hand was cracked and dry, his nails ripped apart by his teeth.

I was still wearing my sweater, and my back was soaked in sweat. I went into my room to change. But before I put on a dry shirt, I looked at myself naked from the waist up in my bathroom mirror.

My arms weren't the thin, slight limbs of other girls my age. My shoulders, biceps and triceps were evident. I'd always known they were there, but I'd never really looked at the lines and shadows they created in my arms. I looked like I was capable of doing anything, short of walking.

My hair fell down my breasts in two thick braids. This was my usual hairstyle, because it was easy. I moved the braids behind my shoulders.

My breasts were underdeveloped, hardly bigger than they'd been at the time of the accident, when they were just beginning to form. Cow udders were more enticing than these. But my arms were my best feature, my sexiest asset.

There was a curling iron in the cabinet beneath my sink. It wasn't mine. One weekend when I visited Dad it was just there, like it had been sitting in the cabinet since

the day he moved in. The cord was wrapped neatly around the handle. A strand of blond was trapped in the iron. I am not a blond. There must have been a forgetful Goldilocks using my bathroom, and Dad must have let her in. I plugged in the iron and switched it on.

I pulled apart my braids, leaving my hair separated into six sections of waves. I wound each piece around the hot iron, counting to ten before I let go. The curls were uneven, looping in different directions and still containing some of the waves from the braids. But when I raked my fingers through my hair and shook it out, I looked less controlled. Older.

I put on a dry shirt and went into the kitchen. Dad was looking in the refrigerator, but he knew I was there, my presence given away by the soft squeak of low air pressure in one of my wheels. “Give me a hand with dinner?” he asked. Was he aware of the irony, or did he simply use that phrase as offhandedly as everyone else? Offhandedly. Ha.

“How does chicken and rice sound? Chicken with rosemary, and a salad?” He turned around, a bag of carrots tucked under one arm and his bad hand cupping a head of lettuce.

“Your braids are gone,” he said.

I nodded. “I curled my hair.”

“Huh. I didn’t know you did that.”

I wheeled to the kitchen table. “I found a curling iron.”

Something flickered through his mind, because he looked me dead in the eye for the first time in who knows how long. But whoever this Goldilocks was, I got the feeling she was no longer in his life, if she ever really was to begin with.

Dad dropped his gaze as he placed the vegetables on the kitchen table next to a cutting board and knife that was in front of me. I picked up the knife. “You know you can buy lettuce that’s already been cut,” I said. “It’s even pre-washed.”

He lit the burner beneath a pan on the stove. “I know,” he said. He leaned against the stove, crossed his arms and watched my hands as I sliced the lettuce and scraped the cutting board, cornering the scraps of leaves into a neat pile.

I wondered what Mom would say if she knew Dad was letting a woman he slept with use my bathroom to make herself sexy. Mom had always worn her hair short, like a pixie, so a curling iron was useless on her. She probably wouldn’t be able to curl my hair any better than I did.

“I want to go back to the coffeehouse tomorrow,” I said.

He didn’t move, just kept looking at my hands as if he didn’t hear me. The only sound came from the hiss of the flame beneath the pan.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” he finally said, scooping up pieces of chicken and throwing them into the hot oil.

“Why not?” I raised my voice so he could hear me over the chicken cooking.

“That man had no business messing with you. He was twice your age.”

“No,” I protested, “he was in college, because he had textbooks.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.” He took a wooden spoon and stirred the chicken around. He had forgotten about the rosemary. “Even if he was in college, you’re still only fifteen.”

“Fifteen-year-olds hang out in coffeehouses all the time!”

“Not all alone, though,” he said.

“Are you serious? You really think that?”

He turned off the heat beneath the chicken, even though it couldn’t possibly be fully cooked, and joined me at the table. “I don’t want you hanging out there anymore while I’m at work.”

“You can’t just keep me locked up in the house,” I said.

“Of course not. You can go to the library or something. And I’m taking time off next week, so it won’t even be an issue. Maybe we could go to the beach.”

“To Atlantic City? Do you know how hard it is to wheel across sand? No thank you. You think I can’t talk to boys in the library?” I asked.

Dad squeezed his eyes shut and rapped his stump on the table, over and over again. “You certainly can’t arm wrestle!”

“But Dad, that’s the whole point. I’m really strong. Look!” I flexed my arm so he could see my impressive bicep.

He glanced at it. “You told me those men let you win.”

“I still held my own.” I grabbed his hand and jerked it toward my body. “If you wrestle me with your bad hand, I bet I could win without any help.”

He pulled his hand out of mine. “That’s not necessary, Marianne.”

“Why not?”

“Just, because.”

“But I want you to see what I can do.”

Dad picked up the knife and cutting board to take them out of the way. Slips of lettuce leaves spilled onto the table. “Tell you what,” he said. “If you win, I’ll let you go back to the coffeehouse, until I’m off work for the week. If I win, you’re not going back there without me. Deal?” He held out his bad hand.

He knew I’d rather go to the library than hang out at a coffeehouse with him.

“Okay,” I said.

“Just remember I’m still right-handed, even without a thumb.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning I’m still capable of a lot with this hand.” He grazed his scar tissue with his index finger before wiggling all four fingers. His injury was not a clean slice at all. A doctor could probably fix all those hills and craters if Dad would only let one.

I put my elbow on the table and took his hand. “On three,” I said, just like Nick had. “One, two—”

I began to push, but Dad anticipated that, and met me without any hesitation. His arm didn’t move, and neither did mine. We may as well have been casually holding hands.

I tried to give myself a little more leverage by gripping the seat of my chair with my other hand, even though that was probably against the rules. My thumb dug into something soft. It was my thigh. I stopped pushing so hard into Dad’s hand.

His grip lessened as well, but neither of us was winning. Our hands wavered in varying degrees of pressure. I couldn't look him in the eye and kept my attention on our hands, but I just knew that he was looking directly at me, staring unflinchingly.

Dad's hand was getting wet, or maybe it was mine, and I tried to let some air in between our palms so they couldn't touch. But every time I tried, he pulled me toward him, once so roughly that my whole upper body moved forward. I looked up at him to see if I could understand what he was trying to do.

His lips parted slightly, and he slackened his hand. My arm slammed his against the table. It was a big noise, and the house had so little furniture that it echoed through the entire ground floor. He slipped his hand out of mine and crossed his arms.

“So you're strong,” he said. “Congratulations.”

I gave a small nod. My arm lay on the table as still as my paralyzed legs.

“I'm going to get back to cooking dinner.” He returned to the stove without another word, rubbing his wet palm against his pants.

At the coffeehouse, Nick had said that pain was all relative. I pinched my tired arm. I could feel it; it was still a part of me. I put my sweaty hand in my lap but didn't wipe it clean.

Dad didn't react to my wheels squeaking as I backed my chair out of the kitchen. I returned to my bathroom, switched on the curling iron, and pulled up my skirt to expose the part of my thigh where I'd thought I felt something when Nick touched me.

I set the iron at its lowest heat. It was no hotter than a warm compress, not hot enough to burn. I pressed it against my thigh. Nothing.

I increased the heat and put my finger on the iron. I could hold it in place for a few seconds before shaking off the sting. But still, when I moved the iron to my leg, that spot on my inner thigh didn't respond.

In the kitchen, hot oil was cracking off meat, and the bathroom filled with the smell of chicken void of any seasoning. The salad lay unfinished on the kitchen table. Neither of us would say anything about it if it just got thrown away.

I set the iron at its hottest heat, as hot as a whistling tea kettle. I only grazed it before I needed to put my finger in my mouth to dull the burn. But I hesitated to lower the iron to my thigh. I was afraid to discover what my body was—or wasn't—capable of. I thought of Nick.

There was warmth, and the sound a drop of water makes when it hits a hot pan. It seeped into my skin as if my nerve endings had been reaching for it, desiring it. A blister quickly blossomed. In a few days it would wither and peel, revealing raw skin and an everlasting scar.

Trailer Visit

Martha's girls quit complaining about their hunger when they saw the swing set. There it stood, just to the left of the trailer, in a gravel yard among dry blades of grass. Luly let go of the handle to the lavender suitcase she'd been rolling and made a dash for the swings. Her foot nicked the side of the suitcase, making it totter once or twice before falling. Maya quickly followed, dropping a bouquet of daisies, the only thing Martha had asked her to carry that morning.

"There's even one for a baby!" Maya shouted, pointing to a bucket seat next to the swings she and Luly had claimed.

Martha struggled to keep her grip on the groceries and overnight bag she was holding. Her girls had a swing in their own backyard an hour away, its arms suspended from a chain attached to hooks hammered into the meat of two trees. Will had put it up for them. But they were pumping their legs with such determination, like they thought these swings hanging from the red, metal A-frame would let them soar higher than they ever could at home. And they paid no mind to what stood fifteen feet behind them: two overlapping chain-link fences topped with barbed wire and razor ribbon. It boxed them all within the grounds of the prison.

Martha turned to speak to the corrections officer who had driven them to the trailer. "There's a swing set?" she asked.

The officer sat in the idling minivan with HOWARD R. YOUNG CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION painted across the doors. He leaned out the window and grinned as if to say, *These wives never know what to expect.* But Martha had been visiting prisons since she was Luly's age, seven years old.

"He'll be by 'round ten," said the officer. "First count is at 11:30." He rolled up the window and drove back toward the prison's main complex. It wouldn't have killed him to help her with the bags first.

This was Martha and the girls' first overnight stay with Will through the Family Reunion Program, though they saw him twice a month in the visitors' room of his wing. He'd had to earn the visit through months of progress in his therapy program, something that was supposed to keep him clean and out of trouble once he was finally released.

Martha hurried to the front door before she lost her hold on the bags. She'd filled them at home that morning, taking care to consider even weight distribution, but now the right angles of boxed dry goods dug into her ribs and breasts. An FRP processor had unpacked and screened them inside the prison, two hours during which Luly and Maya griped about being hungry. She hadn't taken seriously the advice of another inmate's wife who'd suggested a pancake breakfast before processing. Martha had thought a big, syrupy meal would've made them too lethargic for when Will arrived and so had fed the girls only cereal and juice.

She probably was overdoing it. Her mother never brought this much on a trailer visit with Martha's father. He'd been in prison for aggravated assault, and Martha's mother never brought her along. When she'd come home the next day, smelling of

boiled meat and men's deodorant, she would say little for the next day or two, massaging her ankles and wrists while dozing in front of the TV.

Once inside the trailer, Martha dropped the bags next to a plastic vase of artificial flowers on a Formica table. They looked better than the daisies, which already had creases in the petals like pencil marks when she bought them. She touched the roses' shiny petals, releasing the scent of furniture polish. She thought of the rosewater her mother wore when they used to visit her father two Wednesday evenings a month, the wedding ring she wrestled off her swollen finger as she steered the car home afterward.

There was a full box of Girl Scout cookies on the table alongside the fake flowers. And there was a couch with throw pillows. TV and VCR. Radio and cassette player. Wall-to-wall carpeting. Electric range and gas oven. Bathtub. A coffee-stained recliner chair. It had been sat in so often that the middle cratered like a cavity.

She opened the kitchen cabinets: real plates and cups, nothing disposable. The drawers held basic but useful cooking utensils. Only the knives were plastic, except for one; a steak knife, attached to the wall by a thick, metal chain, lay in the dish drainer.

Martha returned outside and called to the girls. "Come bring your suitcase in before your daddy gets here!" She almost said *home* instead of *here*.

Luly jumped from her swing when it reached its highest point and took off in a skip straight out of her landing. Maya ignored Martha. She was only four years old, but she still knew better. "Young lady," Martha warned, "don't even think rules don't apply because we're not at home. This isn't a vacation."

Luly wheeled the suitcase to the front steps, and Martha lifted it inside. She took one step into the trailer and paused, her tongue twisting into a hole left by a baby tooth that had fallen out two days before. “Wow,” she said. She had on her face the dumb look Martha associated with her first husband—the look he wore when she asked him to warm up the bottle for the baby. That baby was Luly; Will was not her birth father.

“I know,” Martha said. She retreated behind the counter that separated the kitchen from the living area and ran her hands over the soft towel threaded through the refrigerator’s door handle.

“Maya, come look!” Luly shouted. Maya would listen to her big sister, and Martha was relieved that she wouldn’t have to yell at her again.

Maya squealed when she came in. She ran to the recliner and tried to work its lever with her little hands.

“Leave it alone, sweetheart,” Martha said. “You could get your fingers caught.”

“Where do we sleep?” Luly asked.

There were two open doorways at the end of the hall. Both contained a full-sized bed and chest of drawers. “Pick one,” Martha said.

The girls explored both rooms, settling on the yellow one. As they bickered over who got which side of the bed, Martha touched the chain connected to the steak knife. The precaution was possibly the only thing that felt right about this moment.

Will stood in the middle of a circle made up by the rest of the men in his workshop. It was devoted to “psychodrama” –reenacting the crimes they’d committed.

It was supposed to be part of the rehabilitation process, to better understand their victims' suffering. Sometimes they played the roles of the victims themselves. Will always thought he was his own victim because he'd never been violent toward anyone and never considered that maybe the owners of the homes he'd broken into, or the people he took drugs with, deserved empathy. He had done all those things to support his own habit.

Not that these other guys weren't victims, too; most of them had been traumatized by some form of abuse by the time they were teenagers. When Will was a teenager, he was hanging out on Slaughter Beach, smoking pot among the hundreds of horseshoe crab carcasses that had become stranded on the beach when laying their eggs. They drove away the tourism that boosted all the other coastal towns not too farther south.

But this was not Will's day to confront his victim self. It was Perry's, a man he often sat with at mealtimes. He stood inside the circle with Will, who knew what Perry had done to get convicted. But Perry never discussed it much, only tried to shrug it off by saying, "My mama, God rest her soul, taught me better than what I done become." In psychodrama, he wasn't going to be able to shrug it off.

"Whenever you're ready, Perry," said Bruce, their counselor. He was leaning forward in his chair and slowly rubbing his palms together. It reminded Will of the way his supplier watched him the first time he tried heroin.

Perry gave Will a long look with unblinking eyes. Will reasoned it was to make him uncomfortable, because he was playing Perry's victim. But he was too nervous about spending the night with Martha and the girls to really understand what was about to happen. Most guys said he'd be so charged up that Martha would just have to brush her

hand across the front of his pants and he'd come. But after eighteen months of visits where not one stood out as different from the rest, he was going to be a real, full-time husband and dad for one whole day and night. He hardly remembered how to play house.

Will gave Perry a little nod.

Perry restrained him so quickly that before anything else Will thought, *Wow, he's really good at this.* Perry stood behind him and pinned Will's arms against his sides with one of his own meaty arms. His free hand hovered near Will's throat. Perry jabbed a pointed finger beneath his Adam's apple. Will's face turned hot, and there was a wave of low chuckling that came from the circle of men.

"You better take out all the money you got, bitch," Perry growled into Will's ear, "or I will kill you, you hear me?" His nails dug into Will's shoulder. Humid breath shot from his nostrils onto Will's neck.

"Okay, Will," Bruce said, "how do you think you as the victim would respond?"

"Um, I think, I'm at an ATM, right?" he asked, even though the counselor went over the details of the crime before the role-playing began. "I guess I would withdraw all my money from the machine." Will tried to raise one arm, but Perry's grip was so powerful he could only get it as high as his elbow. His fingers shook as he pretended to punch buttons on an ATM, and he hoped the other men thought his trembling was part of the act. What had Perry's real victim looked like? He imagined her skin a deep tan, a raised mole on her left wrist. Tiny pictures painted on her fingernails to match the time of year, like snowflakes in January. Pretty, painted nails withdrawing her meager savings in exchange for her life.

“Please, don’t hurt me,” Will said. “You can have all the money, then just please let me go.” The words sounded corny, but they’d sound dire coming from a woman spitting them out between sobs and frenetic breaths.

“Where’s the fucking money?” Perry yelled. His snarl bounced off the walls and back into Will’s face. “You ain’t fucking with me, are you?” Cuz if you’re fucking with me, I can fuck with you too.” A chorus of *ooohs* came from their fellow inmates.

“No,” Will pleaded. “Here’s all I have.” He pretended to clutch a wad of twenties. He knew it couldn’t have been much, maybe a hundred bucks at most. Goddammit, why would this idiot woman go to an ATM alone in the middle of the night? That’s something Martha would have done, not even thinking.

“Not enough,” Perry said. “I may have to cut you from ear to ear.”

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” Bruce said. Will thought Perry would slacken a bit as they received direction, but Perry clung on.

“Perry,” Bruce continued, “you’re doing a great job representing yourself as a perpetrator. But you carried out this assault with a gun, not a knife. It’s important to relive it as it really happened.”

Perry continued to dig his finger deeper into Will’s neck. Will realized how incredibly easy it could be to choke somebody.

“This is a different time,” Perry said. Every part of his body was just slightly offset from the same parts on Will: his foot, his shoulder, his cheek.

“Different crime,” Perry continued. “She didn’t get away. I did.”

Bruce sat back in his chair and took in the scene, as if trying to decide how to direct his actors. The other men began throwing out advice. “Dude, don’t implicate yourself!” “Work it out, brother. It’s alright.”

“What are you doing?” Will whispered.

“I need this,” Perry answered, the wet weight of shame rising in his throat.

“Is this okay with you?” Bruce asked Will. He nodded, afraid of what he’d look like if he didn’t see it through.

“Okay then,” Bruce said. “Go on.”

Perry must have forgotten about the invisible money Will still held in his hand, because he hustled Will to a table outside of the circle and bent him over it. Chairs clattered as the men turned to watch, but otherwise they had fallen silent. Perry yanked at Will’s scrubs at the waist while still keeping his deadly finger poised on Will’s neck. Only by the fact that Perry didn’t actually pull his pants down did Will understand that the role-playing hadn’t crossed over into something else. Being this vulnerable scared him, but he didn’t want to plead for mercy because he feared the audience might suspect he wasn’t pretending.

“She made this noise,” Perry said, “like crying, moaning, but not for liking it, no, `course not.” Perry slammed his pelvis against Will’s bent body, the table moving with each thrust.

Will looked at the other men. Their faces held a mixture of shock over what Perry was admitting to and amusement for Will’s role as rape victim. Bruce’s face was stuck in its usual sympathy mask.

He couldn't believe this was happening to him, and he knew that thought must flash through the mind of just about every assault victim. He gripped the table and pushed back against Perry's hips so forcefully that Perry lost his hold. Will straightened himself and took a few steps away. He wanted to hit Perry, but that would get him kicked out of the program.

Perry collapsed on the table, tears and snot dripping from his face and pooling right where the small of the victim's back would have been. He cried that he should be dead. He should be dead. He pleaded for his mama. Will wanted him to upright himself, wipe his face, offer a general apology and sit the fuck down.

Bruce approached Perry and spoke in a lullaby voice into his ear. He asked permission to put his hand on Perry's shoulder, and helped him stand before leading him out of the room. He didn't even look at Will.

Someone offered a tentative clap and soon the other inmates joined in. Will stood against the wall readjusting his scrubs.

Everyone stared at him after the applause faded. "You alright, man?" someone asked. He nodded, not quite sure he could put an answer into words that wouldn't quiver. Finally the men folded their chairs and stacked them against a wall, because workshop would've been ending then, whether Perry had dissolved or not.

Because that was standard around there, in the prison's substance abuse program that Will had applied to be a part of: watching men dissolve. Will had yet to dissolve himself. What he just experienced wasn't what he called dissolving, and he was afraid of what that may really feel like.

A man came up to him, the one everybody called Holyfield, because one of his ears was gnarled. “What do you think that means for him?” Holyfield asked. “Can they charge him for that, if they find the girl? Or is he gonna get kicked out of group?”

“I don’t know,” Will said. “But now I gotta go see my girls.” He was still holding his scrubs at the waist and crushed the fabric into his fists. “Christ, after that.”

Maya and Luly had their suitcase open in the middle of the living area. They tossed aside their clothes to reach their collection of pastel-colored unicorns with plastic jewels for eyes. “Let’s line them up on the chair,” Maya said, meaning the recliner. She’d been playing on it for most of the morning, even asking Martha if they could get one for their own house. Martha said no, because they were tacky and called Lazy Boys for good reason. But their ranch-style house used to have one, long before Maya and Luly were born. The house they lived in was Martha’s childhood home, now hers ever since her mother packed her van and moved south. The recliner was her father’s, and it was where he had held court, demanding meals and for someone to change the channel since the TV had no remote. And he would beckon Martha to sit on his lap, where his fingers would work their way in through the holes in her underpants.

It remained in the house after he was arrested, its unraveling upholstery like a neglected, overgrown hedge. He never sat in it again because he died in prison.

Martha couldn’t afford to refurnish the house once she took it over, but she did drag that hulking thing outside to the curb, its body unfolding on its own. It left deep grooves in the wooden walkway that never fully faded even with sanding, but once that

recliner was gone, she knew she could start calling that place home, even though she'd never lived anywhere else.

“Get all that stuff in your room *now*,” Martha told the girls as she fried bacon on the stove.

Luly came up next to her. “We’re having another breakfast?” she asked.

“You wouldn’t stop harping about how starving you were,” Martha said, though Maya and Luly hadn’t said one negative word since they saw the swings.

“How much longer?”

“It’ll be ready in about five minutes.” The eggs she would scramble came from a carton, but the bacon was the real thing. She couldn’t believe bacon was allowed. It seemed like such an indulgence, something that should be withheld as punishment. But any meat that was hermetically sealed—and only hermetically sealed—was allowed.

Hermetically was a word she never knew the meaning of until she needed to.

“No,” Luly said, “how much longer until Daddy gets here?” She didn’t remember her real father. It was better that way.

“Soon. Are you ready to see him?” Luly smiled and nodded.

In Martha’s overnight bag was a lacy negligee she planned to wear that night after the girls were in bed. Will used to pull down one strap to take her breast in his mouth and she could hardly stand to wait for his clothes to come off. When they did, she’d usually detect the slightest hint of something heady, like incense. It came from where he went to do drugs.

Martha hadn't had sex with Will in two years, hadn't had a visit with him that lasted more than ninety minutes, hadn't had a conversation that dug any deeper than what was going on with the girls. Her mother sometimes called from a lawn chair on the front porch of an SRO in Miami and would tell her to visit Will even less, like it was unacceptable to be in love with an addict.

Will had been to prison twice already before Martha met him. Lesser drug charges, lighter sentences. Martha had spent her life surrounded by men who *weren't* drug addicts: her father, and Luly's; the men her mother fucked in the recliner, their hands gripping the armrests that Martha had been told to straddle and grind between her legs. If the gentlest man she'd ever met just so happened to also, and unfortunately, have a drug problem, then she was okay with that. She'd make sure he could function, stay out of trouble.

And yet he still was arrested. When he pleaded guilty and applied to enter the prison's drug treatment community, she felt like it was his way of saying that she had failed him. When she visited him week after week, she saw no evidence that he was struggling with sobriety. He could function just fine without her.

Will, cuffed at the wrists and ankles, rode in a van smeared with the green-black shit of geese. The inmates called their home Gander Hill Prison. Gander Hill was the surrounding neighborhood, but the men inside knew there was more to the name than that. They had sidestepped the sludge, had cornered wayward geese in the exercise yard. And, despite the breadth of the walls that separated Will from the outside, he heard them

on cold mornings, squawking, chirping, bleating, crying—whatever it was that warbled in the geese’s throats to produce that jalopy horn of a voice. Long before there was a prison or a neighborhood, there was a gander’s hill. Migratory instincts kept bringing the geese back long after that first displaced gaggle died off, and the concrete corners of the exercise yard collected the feathers that drifted in the wind.

Will thought he could still feel the pressure of Perry’s hand on his hip. He never knew that Perry had raped a woman. Maybe she wasn’t the only one, and maybe some of the other men he spent his days with had done the same thing. Only a few in his program had been convicted of some sort of assault. Most were in jail for drug-related offenses, like him. But with Perry’s admission, God only knew what else they’d done, what they’d never been caught doing.

Will wasn’t a good man; he’d wasted his life until he found a woman who gave some structure to it. But he was a better man than most of his friends. There were whole weeks of his life he couldn’t remember, but he knew he couldn’t have been violent during that lost time.

“Looking forward to the visit?” The officer driving Will to the trailer looked at him through the rearview mirror.

“Sure.”

“Just your wife visiting, or your kids too?” The officer’s name was Sonny, short for Santiago or Santino, Will couldn’t remember which. He was supposed to call him Officer Silva.

He liked Sonny. He thought he could enjoy a poker game with him, swapping stories about the crazy things their wives put them through. But nothing like that would ever happen after Will was released.

“My daughters came, too,” Will said.

“Interesting. Most guys on their first overnighter, it’s just him and the wife. They don’t want to be babysitting when they could be screwing.”

“I’ll bet.” Will had been the one to suggest that the girls come.

“Still,” Sonny continued, “it always helps to see the kids. And they’ve gotta go to bed at some point, right?”

“You got it.” The van slowed as it approached the trailer. He hadn’t realized that this semblance of freedom sat so close to the prison walls.

“Here we are,” Sonny said as they stopped near the gravel front lawn. He removed Will’s cuffs once they were out of the van. Will carried a change of clothes and a plastic baggie of toiletries. He noticed the daisies lying on the ground. The petals were beaded with that familiar green-black sludge, still wet.

Martha opened the door before either man had a chance to knock. She wore a white sundress with navy blue polka dots, and tied around her waist was a yellow apron trimmed with ruffles, like she was trying to role-play a 1950s housewife. Spaghetti-strap tan lines reached behind her neck.

“Hey,” Martha said so quietly she barely heard herself. She hugged Will and gave him a closed-mouth kiss. She wondered how long the officer was staying and if she should offer him coffee.

But after she broke away from Will, the officer nodded at both of them. “Have a nice visit,” he said. He returned to the van.

Martha hugged Will again after she shut the door, holding him longer than she felt was acceptable during their traditional visits. But she didn’t give him another kiss. She felt like she was at a high school dance, where neither the boy nor girl knew how to ask the other to join them on the floor. “I’m so glad we get to do this,” she said.

“Me too,” he said.

“You earned this visit. I’m proud of you.”

He nodded. “I have a hierarchy of needs in order to get better. This accomplishes some of that.”

Martha smiled, but she had no idea what he meant. He spoke like that, every now and then. It had to be part of the program.

He traced his finger up and down her tan lines. “You look really nice.”

“Thanks.” She studied him for any changes, like she always did on visits. The stubble on his face looked like it was going gray. Will was allowed to shave three times a week, so she was disappointed he hadn’t done so before their visit. “You’re not wearing orange?” she asked.

“Nope, no scrubs today or tomorrow,” he said. He wore a pair of jeans and button-down blue work shirt. He still wore the standard slip-on canvas sneakers.

He put his clothes and toiletries on the table, smirking slightly at the fake flowers. “I know, they’re silly,” Martha said. “They were there when we got here.”

“Where are the girls?” he asked.

“Playing in their room, but it’s gotten quiet. They’ve probably dozed off. They were up early and I just served them a big breakfast. Do you want me to get them?”

“Give them a few more minutes,” he said.

“Of course,” she said. “Want me to show you around?”

Will, with his arms folded across his chest, swiveled back and forth in the spot where he stood. “Looks good.”

“There’s a bathtub. I don’t suppose you can have a bath over there.”

“Nope, only showers.”

“So, here’s your chance.”

“Maybe. I’ve never been much of a bath guy.” He picked at a loose thread on his shirt.

“Oh. I guess you’re right.” She was silent for a moment as she tried to think of what else to say when the lingering smell of bacon reminded her. “Are you hungry? There’s bacon, and I can warm up some scrambled eggs. I waited in case you wanted to have some.”

“You go ahead, thanks. I’m good. Actually, I think it’s time to get the girls. I’ll go surprise them, okay?”

“Alright, just—” Martha hesitated as she tried to find the best way to put what she needed to say. “Don’t feel bad if they seem afraid, or shy.”

“I know,” he said. “Just as weird for me as it is for them.” He headed toward the bedroom.

Martha looked at the leftover strips lying on a paper towel. She threw them in the trash.

She picked up Will's plastic bag. There was toothpaste, a dull comb, and deodorant. No razor, but that wasn't surprising, since she wasn't allowed to bring one, either. His face would be rough and scraggly for the entire visit.

Will quietly pushed open the bedroom door. The girls were lying on the bed; Luly's arm was draped over Maya's torso. Will scratched his fingernail on the doorframe, and Luly's eyes opened. She smiled at her father, but also pulled her arm tighter around her sister.

"Hey, babydoll," Will whispered. He didn't move; Martha didn't need to tell him to let them approach him on their terms. With every visit to the prison, Luly greeted him shyly and stared at the other inmates for a good ten minutes before she'd open up to Will about her ballet lessons or gold stars on her spelling tests. She'd hug him goodbye with tears in her eyes, but by the next visit, Will would have to start at square one to make her feel comfortable again. And that's why hands down, Luly was his favorite daughter: she was disappointed that he was in prison.

Luly gently poked Maya in the ribs. "Look," she whispered.

The peaceful moment broke when Maya saw Will. She shrieked and clung to Luly. Will took a step back, but Luly continued to smile. Maya was just fooling around. He wiggled his fingers with the threats of tickles.

Maya jumped off the bed and ran past Will, her giggling syncopated. Luly followed her, throwing a pleased look at Will, who chased them toward the kitchen.

They took cover behind Martha, their sounds growing in pitch as he extended his arms to attack. Maya shaped her hand into a gun and aimed it at him.

“Stick ‘em up!” she said.

Will took a step back and raised his hands. He wondered if she thought of him as a criminal like other kids thought of their fathers as doctors or firemen.

“Bang bang!” Maya shouted, moving her middle finger like it was a trigger. Luly winced at her sister’s voice.

“Maya, cut that out,” Martha said. “We don’t play with guns of any kind. I’m sorry,” she said to Will.

He lowered his hands. “No big deal.”

Maya turned her gun on herself and softly continued to fire it. Luly reached out to Will and put her arms around his waist.

“Hello, babydoll,” he said. “I missed you bunches.” He looked at Martha.

“What’s that all about?” he asked, nodding toward Maya.

“What do you mean?”

He broke away from Luly, removing her hands from where Perry had held him earlier.

“She understands that I’m not in here for that, right?” He lowered his voice. “I don’t want them thinking I’m here because I shot someone.” Will had never used a gun in his life. Maya approached him with her arms out, her one hand still loosely shaped. He knelt so she could put her arms around his upper half.

“Honey, don’t read into it, it didn’t mean anything,” Martha said.

Will kissed the top of Maya's head and stood back up. "I thought you explained it to them."

"You really think I've never explained why?"

Luly tugged at Will's pinkie finger. "You're not a robber," she said. "You used drugs, and that's against the law."

Will nodded at her. Technically, he had stolen to support his habit, but she didn't need to know that. "That's right," he said. "But it's not you I'm worried about."

"Maya's fine for now," Martha said in a sing-song voice as she stroked their daughter's hair. "She's only four. Right, sweetie?" Maya nodded.

"Alright," he said. He walked down short hallway once again. Luly tried to walk beside him, but it was too narrow to be comfortably side by side, so he took her shoulders and guided her in front of him.

At the end of the hallway, he saw the bed he would share with Martha. Obviously it was bigger than the bunk in his cell, but still looked too small. He sat on it for a moment before lying in the middle, extending his limbs to its corners. It was the kind of personal space he hadn't enjoyed in nearly two years, but still his hands and feet hung beyond the mattress.

"Are you okay?"

Will raised his head. Martha was in the doorway. "Don't mind me," he said. "Just giving it a feel." He went to the dresser and opened the drawers one by one. He recognized Martha's negligee. He wanted to touch it, feel a texture he was no longer

used to. But it seemed improper, like he was snooping in the bedroom of a teenage crush instead of his own wife. When he looked at Martha, she averted her eyes.

Will ended his exploration in the kitchen, where he saw the chained knife. He went to touch it, but quickly withdrew his hand as he felt three pairs of eyes watching his every move.

“We’ll need that to carve the chicken,” Martha said.

“Chicken?”

She opened the refrigerator and pointed to a small chicken sealed in plastic. “I thought we could have a Thanksgiving dinner, since we don’t really get to spend the holidays together.”

“But it’s the middle of the summer.”

“I know, but I thought it would be nice. It’s just a chicken.”

He chuckled. “Did you bring a Christmas tree, too?”

“Of course not,” she said.

“Sorry,” he said. Last November he’d told her that his holiday meal consisted of a breaded chicken cutlet, mashed potatoes from a box, and gravy and cranberry jelly from cans. It actually wasn’t half bad. But Martha must have taken pity on him and filed that bit of information in her mind.

“It’s a nice idea,” he said. “Just seems like a lot of work. And I just kind of want to relax, maybe lie on the couch and watch a ballgame. Not the whole time, of course, but still.”

“There’s easy things you can do while you watch a game, like mix up the pie.”

“I don’t like pie,” Maya whined. “Why didn’t you make cookies?” Luly shushed her.

Just like Martha to try and keep him busy. “Okay,” he said. Will turned to the girls and tightened his face into a grin. “I saw we’ve got swings. You want me to push you?”

“You don’t have to right this minute,” Martha said. “You just got here.”

“I want to spend as much time outside as I can. You can join us.” Maya and Luly each hooked a hand into one of his, coaxing him to the front door.

Martha shook her head. “It’s okay. You go ahead, get some time in with them. I’ll start getting things ready for dinner. We can eat early since it’ll be a big meal.”

A grocery bag sat on the table, unpacked. It looked like something insurmountable.

Martha sat at the table, the raw chicken splayed on a roasting pan in front of her. She could hear the soft whine of the swings as Will pushed the girls outside.

She sprinkled salt and pepper over the bird and slowly rubbed it in. Her fingers worked beneath the skin, pushing slivers of garlic onto the breasts. She stared at the recliner sitting across the room. Its burnt orange upholstery and oversized back cushion were out of place with the rest of the room’s plain furniture of gray and blue, like a stranger you open your door to against your better judgment.

Martha’s mother had never explained to her what her father did to be put away: he tried to rape a young girl, a friend of hers who had lived in their neighborhood. The girl

and her family moved after Martha's father was convicted. She'd liked to think her father was being punished for touching her on the recliner, although she never told anyone. She was a teenager before she finally learned the truth, and she no longer thought of her father as a criminal. She thought of him as a bad man, which, to her mind, seemed far worse.

The only other criminal she knew couldn't explain her father. "Not everyone is complex," Will had said. "That's probably what makes it worse, more heartbreaking."

Habitual offender wasn't an easy thing to explain to Maya and Luly, so she'd tried to make them understand what Will was *not* in prison for: hurting people. Why he thought she had never talked to the girls about it all this time was absurd. Perhaps this new Will, the rehabilitated Will, didn't trust her like he once did.

Will stood between the two swings, pushing both girls at once. The trailer must have helped Maya and Luly with their transition to Will: it didn't give the appearance of visiting him in prison. No other inmates surrounding them. No officers standing in the corners looking bored yet absorbing every goddamn word exchanged during visits, hoping for gossip. They saw the comforts of home: the TV, the swings, a homemade breakfast. He saw the knife on a chain; the sealed, plastic cup in the bathroom for a urine sample; the panic button beneath the kitchen counter. They were precautions for visits with people like Perry. But they only served to make him feel lumped in with people like Perry—a man who would not earn a trailer visit anytime soon.

Maya and Luly chattered nonstop as they glided on the swings, interrupting themselves to tell Will something he wasn't really listening to, but that was okay. He was there to push them, maybe read them a story later, and he could handle those tasks just fine. As for Martha—well, they'd get used to each other again in a few hours, wouldn't they?

He stopped pushing when he saw something around the corner of the trailer: a goose.

"I'll be damned," he said. "You don't usually see them in the summer." The girls quit talking once they saw the goose, too, and their toes tried to scrape the ground to bring the swings to a stop.

"It's a duck!" Maya said.

"It's a goose," Will said. "Kind of like a big duck."

Luly got off her swing and stood behind Will. He crouched beside her, keeping a good six feet between her and the goose. "He won't hurt you," he said.

Once Maya's feet were firmly on the ground, she began inching slowly toward the bird. Will told her to stop.

"Can we feed it?" Luly asked. She tongued the toothless slot in her mouth.

"Not sure what they eat around here," he said.

The goose pecked at the frame of the swing set before eyeing Will and the girls. And then he trumpeted the most spectacular sound. Will had never heard a goose so up close before.

"He's talking!" Maya said, and gave her best impression of a goose. "Caw!"

The goose's call grew louder, more intense, and Maya cried right back at it, both in volume and power, until she was screaming over and over again.

There was a woman Will knew from the place where he went for a fix, and there was a time when he was as shapeless as a puddle on the basement floor as she paced back and forth. She had been screaming as chillingly as Maya. He had followed the woman with his eyes for a minute or two. She still had a rubber tourniquet tied around her arm. Will looked at his body and willed it to come to life again, to take form and get up off the ground. The woman shuffled past him again, and he slipped his finger between her arm and the rubber strap. The strap loosened and fell to the floor. She stopped screaming, just like that. She looked at him like she'd been touched by a faith healer, but really, loosening that strap was the only thing he knew to do with his life in that very moment.

"Maya, enough!" he shouted. He remembered himself folded beneath Perry's weight on the table. He remembered the scream inside him that he didn't dare release.

"What is going on?" Martha was outside.

The goose lost interest in its conversation with Maya and stalked alongside the fence. Maya got quiet as well.

"She's pretending to be a goose," Will said.

"It sounds like somebody's getting killed out here."

"Oh, come on, it wasn't that bad."

"I just don't think this is the place to be making such an awful sound," she said.

"You know?"

Both turned their heads at the sound of a van. The 11:30 count.

“You go ahead and do what you need to do,” Martha said. “I’ll keep the girls busy inside.”

“The officer has to check in with you, too,” Will said.

“Why?”

“In case you feel threatened, want to bail on the visit,” he said. “I mean, that’s just what they do.”

Martha took a long look at the razor-topped fence. “I think we’re fine,” she said.

“Okay.” He watched the bird waddle toward the van. “Just tell him that.”

Will stayed outside for another fifteen minutes once the officer left. Martha watched him from a window as he smoked a cigarette and paced back and forth. She hadn’t seen him from this distance in a long time. He was standing straighter than he used to. He spent most of the time gazing at the main prison complex, and she could hardly remember when he was ever that focused.

She switched on the television and found a baseball game about to begin. “Don’t change this,” she said to the girls, who were playing with paper dolls at the table.

“Daddy wants to watch the game.”

Luly looked up from her paper dolls once Will returned inside. “We put the baseball game on for you, Daddy.”

“You did?” he asked, stroking her head. “That was very sweet of you.”

“Actually, I found the channel,” Martha said, realizing how juvenile she sounded.

“That’s great, honey,” Will said in the same fatherly tone he used when responding to Luly. “You still want me to mix up that pie?”

“No, don’t worry about it,” Martha said. “You go ahead and relax.”

Will kissed her on the cheek. He settled into the recliner, fiddling with the lever to put his feet up.

Martha returned to the kitchen and turned on the oven to 400 degrees before pulling out the ingredients for pumpkin pie. Will sat in the recliner holding the remote limply in his hand, his legs slightly parted, his knees bowing toward the sides of the chair.

Maya ran to the recliner with the box of Girl Scout cookies in her hands. “Up, Daddy,” she said, climbing onto his lap. Will positioned her so she was tucked to one side of him, her legs stretched across his thighs. Will opened the box of cookies for her and they ate them together as they watched TV.

Martha remembered the times her mother took her visit her father. He would tell Martha to buy a pack of cupcakes with her allowance from the vending machine in the visiting room. The chocolate clung to his teeth and he’d tell her to stay away from boys, even at seven years old, when she saw boys as nothing more than angular versions of herself. It didn’t occur to her that they could one day be like him.

Luly came up beside her. “I want to sit on Daddy’s lap,” she whined.

“No,” Martha said. “You’re too old to be sitting on your father’s lap anymore.”

The heat of the oven rose up her legs, pressed against her hips until it had enveloped her whole body. A few licks of hair clung to her neck. “Will,” she managed to say, “can you

turn up the air?” The window unit near the recliner groaned like an old man getting out of bed.

Will remained in the recliner for most of the game. It was an exciting one, and he yelled at the players more than once until he caught Martha staring at him. Sometimes he only pretended to watch but was really looking above the TV and at Martha. A frozen piecrust lying on the counter was twisted and warped. Perhaps it was damaged during the journey to the trailer. Martha was trying to rework it into an acceptable pie shape, not giving it enough time to thaw. He wondered what she had planned for the next day.

He dozed for a bit and woke to the smell of roast chicken. “I need you to carve the chicken. We’re almost ready to eat,” Martha said to him from the kitchen. Luly was setting the table and Maya was ripping paper towels from a roll to use as napkins. The plastic roses had disappeared from the vase and been replaced by a toy unicorn.

“Sure thing,” he said. In the kitchen, he saw the containers their meal had come in: cans and boxes.

“No fresh veggies?” he asked. He picked up the chained knife and studied the chicken. He’d never carved one sober. He made careful incisions around the meaty parts of the legs.

“I couldn’t bring fresh produce,” Martha said, looking at the chicken as if she was critiquing his form. “So it’s green beans and corn from a can.”

“Mashed potatoes?”

“From a box.”

Will couldn't help but laugh as he wrenched off the chicken legs and slapped them onto a plate. "What?" Martha asked.

"It's just when you said we were having Thanksgiving dinner, and you showed me a whole goddamn chicken, I thought it was gonna be a real to do. But it's not much different than what I got."

"There were rules I had to follow. We couldn't just do whatever we felt like."

"Don't remind me." Will could see barbed wire from every window in the trailer. He began to separate the wings from the rest of the bird.

"So cut me some slack."

"You just don't need to force it." The chain on the knife clanged against the pan as he tried to saw through bone.

"I didn't think I was," Martha said.

"Thanksgiving? It's summer. There's a grill outside. We could've just had burgers."

"I thought you didn't like burgers."

"What? Of course I like burgers. Everybody likes burgers."

She looked at him as if he was lying. "You never used to eat them. And I was never good with a grill, and I didn't want you to hurt yourself trying to use one."

"I hardly ate much of anything. And what did you think I was gonna do, plant my face on it?" He pierced the breast meat and ran the knife down the middle like he was opening a cardboard box.

"I don't know. You're making a mess of that chicken."

“I’ve got it. I got enough people over here who control my every move.”

“Fine.” Martha took the pots of boiled vegetables to the table. Will scratched his forehead, leaving behind a slime trail of chicken juice. The girls were sitting at the table in front of their plates: trays, sectioned off in different shapes for each part of the meal. He watched Martha pour spoonfuls of beans, corn and potatoes into the sections. The girls looked completely unimpressed with the meal. Whether Martha brought the trays or they were already in the trailer, he didn’t know, but he didn’t know why she had to go ahead and use them.

“Look, I’m sorry,” he said when she returned. He scraped bits of chicken onto the serving plate and put down the knife. “I’m all out of sorts. It’s been a weird day, and it started with me pretending to be raped. In front of the guys.”

Martha looked confused. “What? And watch what you say.”

“They don’t know what I’m talking about,” Will said, but when he glanced at the table again, Luly and Maya were watching them intently. “Or at least, they shouldn’t.”

Martha grabbed the plate of carved chicken, looked at it for a moment, then returned it to the counter. Her fingernails were painted red, white and blue, for July Fourth. Will thought of them punching ATM buttons in exchange for her life. “Tell me what happened.”

“Therapy,” Will said. “It’s a long story. But my friend Perry, he...did that to someone, and had to play it out, and I was the unlucky one who had to pretend along with him.”

“You’re friends with a rapist?” she asked, loudly enough for Luly and Maya to hear. Luly looked nervous, and Maya kept her gaze on her big sister, as if she had to gauge how she should feel according to Luly’s reaction.

“It’s not like I knew that about him. Not until today.”

“Are you still going to talk to him after that?”

“It’ll be weird at first, but yes, I assume so.”

“I don’t want you to,” Martha stated. She took a few steps back from him.

“It’s not up to you,” he said. “Martha, I’ve got to have friends in there.”

“It’s just, those people have all this influence on you. And you want me to think it’s a good one, but... You once told me that kind of man was bad through and through. That there was nothing complex about them.”

“What are you talking about?” Will felt like he was about to walk into some sort of trap. Martha was looking at him not in fear or in anger, but disappointment. All their years together, she never looked at him that way until he told her he was going to clean up for good.

“The recliner,” she said.

Her father. Christ. “Baby, I’m not excusing what your dad did. And I’m not like the guys in the program, or not what they were. But they’re trying to get better. They’d get kicked out of the program if they weren’t.” He looked out the window toward the main prison complex. He was so turned around he didn’t know which part of the building they were facing. But Perry was in there somewhere, wishing he was dead.

“I’m just scared of what you’re going to be like when you’re released.”

Will looked at her. “Scared of what?” He moved closer to her.

“If you slip, it’ll be okay,” Martha said, her voice soft and almost seductive. “I won’t be mad. I’ll make sure this time nothing happens to you.”

So she really did like him better when he was totally out of his mind. He couldn’t wait to bring this up in workshop. “Instead of trying to keep me out of trouble, you should’ve been showing some tough love to help me quit.”

“Jesus, Will,” she said. “You always say ‘you can’t help someone who doesn’t want help.’”

“There’s a word for a person like you,” he said. “‘Enabler.’”

“Give the fucking psychobabble a rest!”

“Mommy!” Luly scolded. Will and Martha had been gradually inching out of the kitchen and toward the hallway, so Luly’s sharp voice came like an electric shock. She sat in front of a pile of congealing potato flakes and probably had as much resentment brimming inside her as the inmates who had to eat the same kind of food every day.

“Mommy’s sorry,” Will told her. “Dinner’s almost ready.”

“The chicken is sitting right there!” Luly yelled. Maya demonstrated the stereotypical child’s-sowl-and-crossed-arms to get her point across.

“Just one minute, babydoll,” he told her. He grabbed Martha’s arm and pushed her farther down the hall.

“Fine, let me put it this way,” he said to Martha. “You tried once. You kept me busy with stupid little tasks. Your mother tried to keep your dad out of trouble, and look how well that turned out.”

“Meaning what?”

“The recliner. She probably thought it kept him contained, away from whatever mess he could get into. She never knew what he did to you. Or she did, but figured it could be worse.”

“You don’t think it was bad enough?”

Will felt the words rising inside his throat, like the scream he dared not unleash when Perry was slamming his sweaty self against him. But he truly didn’t believe they belonged to him. “Keeping it in the home stops it from happening somewhere else, or to someone else, right? I mean, that was your solution with me. And it’s not like he did to you what Perry pretended to do to me. I’m not saying it wasn’t awful for you. But it could’ve been much, much worse. And he had the sense to stop where he did.” As soon as he said it, he knew he couldn’t have hurt her any more than if he had backhanded her and sent her falling to the floor.

The chicken was dry, and the warmth beaten out of it by air conditioning. Martha had forgotten to buy gravy. The vegetables developed some saliva-clear film that had to be scraped away, and the pie never took to the crust’s deformed body, baking unevenly. Will and his family ate all of it. The girls complained of stomach aches and wanted to go to bed.

A knock came at the door early in the evening. Maya answered it without hesitation, with no thought that maybe an adult should answer the door. Perhaps she had

an awareness of where she really was, and the people she shouldn't open the door to were locked in the fat, concrete building a quick van ride away.

It was Officer Silva. Will told him things were just fine. Martha told him things were just fine. Her manicured hands held the chicken carcass as she stood at the door. Her tan had begun to peel around her bare shoulders.

Officer Silva winked at Will when it was just the two of them. Will asked him if he had any plans that night when he was off duty. The officer looked taken aback by the question, probably because an inmate wasn't supposed to ask him about his private life. "Sure I do," he answered, and returned to the van.

She asked him to close up while she put the girls to bed—do "the man thing." That's what she had called locking up when they lived together. Close blinds, lock doors and windows. He heard her reading to the girls *Goodnight Moon*. *Goodnight clocks*, and *goodnight socks*. *Goodnight little house*, and *goodnight mouse*. Will lowered the blinds one by one. Goodnight swings. Goodnight razor ribbon, and goodnight daisies crushed in the grass. Goodnight floodlight, and goodnight, prison. Goodnight goose. Goodnight, Perry.

Will checked the door. It didn't have a lock.

"I'm not the one who made you start using," Martha said as they lay in bed. She wondered what her mother would say about letting him sleep in the same bed as her after what he said. The same mother who consistently fucked a pedophile in a conjugal visit trailer.

There was no air conditioner in the room. They kept the sheet around their knees, a box fan blowing across their chests. They stared at the ceiling, their bodies not touching. Martha wore shorts and a t-shirt. The negligee was still in the dresser.

“I know,” Will said. “You had nothing to do with it.”

“Nothing at all had anything to do with it,” she said with a sad laugh in her voice. “You were just a dumb kid who turned into a dumb guy.”

“I know.”

“And here’s where it got you.” She felt the words slip from her mouth as gentle as a nursery rhyme.

Will didn’t respond. After a few minutes she heard his runny nose, a stifled sob, a big tear fall onto the mattress. Sounds in the night she had known intimately, until he was put in this place to become a better man.

She was straddling him naked before he had a chance to wipe his face. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“We’re supposed to do this,” she said, shielding her breasts from the blast of the box fan. She got onto her knees and pulled down his underwear.

Will’s body just took over. But the way he touched her, and the way he responded to her, was wholly foreign to her. He wasn’t there at all.

Will sat surrounded by the men in his workshop. No one shared the circle with him. Perry was no longer there. The counselor Bruce nodded at him like a movie director silently calling *action*.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Will said. “Martha was, or maybe she was just pretending, I can’t tell anymore. But I left. There’s no lock on that thing, so you can go outside whenever you want.” He kneeled on the floor, raised his arms to eye level and laced his fingers like they were holding a heavy bottle by the neck.

He remembered the quiet, the crickets thick in song. He thought of his fellow inmates asleep in their bunks like campers. “This goose had been hanging around all day, and it came up to me. Just walked right up to me like we were buddies.” Will focused on his hands and didn’t look at the men. He hoped that if they were angry with what he was about to do, they’d shout until he felt compelled to stop.

Will drew his fingers tighter until his hands were locked in one fist. “He wasn’t expecting me to do it, but I was quick, and once I had his throat, it was so easy to squeeze, easier than I thought it ever could be.” He looked at the scratches on his knuckles where the goose had snapped at him to break free. Will had thought all he’d have to do was squeeze until the poor thing stopped breathing. “And then there was this sound.” It was like breaking a tree limb over your knee, only smaller, diluted. “I broke his neck.”

He separated his hands and stood. He stared at the spot by his feet where he’d left his kill. “I just didn’t know how we were gonna get through another day. Before I’d thought, ‘well, we’ll have an arguement or two, then we’ll be used to living with each other again.’ It didn’t work out that way.”

Elegy for Arnold Schuster

She was kneeling in the kitchen of her Brooklyn apartment, stripping the floor of its chipped tiles, when her father called. She imagined the South Florida sun filtered by palm fronds falling across his hospital bed. Her radiator clanged.

--If you get a chance, find me Arnold Schuster, he said, after he breathed a hello.

--Who's Arnold Schuster? she asked.

They rarely spoke longer than three minutes. She set her kitchen timer for that long, to see which came first: his goodbye or the timer's shrill ring.

--He was a guy who was killed for turning in Willie Sutton, a bank robber.

Her father's tongue was woolen from so many doses of Thalidomide. It had once been used to treat morning sickness, until women gave birth to flippered children, who later found work in the circus, where they'd wiggle the fingers that sprouted from their shoulders. Now, it was supposed to slow down his illness.

--Did you know one of them? she asked.

--No, I was just a kid then. There was an article about Arnold Schuster's murder in *The Brooklyn Eagle*, he said. --And a picture that gave me the worst fright of my life, up to that point.

--Why?

--You'll see.

--Then why do you want to see it now? she asked. She pulled another tile off the floor and threw it in the trash, exposing a streak of decaying glue. Her apartment was falling apart, but that's the only way she could afford it. She thought of it as a work in progress.

Her father's answer came slowly, as if he didn't have a reason until then. --It's just something I want to look at, now that I'm older. Find me that picture.

The timer's dial inched toward zero. She cupped her palm around it, and soon felt the bell struggle to sound its alarm.

--What's that? her father asked.

--A fire truck.

--I hear it's freezing up there, he said.

She reached for an afghan hanging over the back of a chair and wrapped it around her body. She waited another few moments before asking, --Perhaps I could come for a visit? She'd never been to Florida in the winter.

--It's not a good time.

There was the threat of snow, and the soft air funneled into the subway station. She took the train to Central Library; it was built like an open book on Grand Army Plaza, its wings like pages stretched between Eastern Parkway and Flatbush Avenue. She didn't think to wear her boots. Cabbage leaves and turnip greens littered the Plaza from the previous day's farmer's market—winter vegetables she never liked. They clung to her shoes on the library's steps.

This had been her father's library as a boy. Copies of *The Eagle* had hung in the reading room on broomstick spindles, ready for unraveling, like that day's *New York Times*. Now it lived on microfilm housed in a steel cabinet. But back then, her dad didn't have to come here to see Schuster's picture in the paper. It was delivered to his house for free, because his mother wrote a medical advice column for *The Eagle*. Her picture filled a quarter of the newspaper page next to her column. She wore a rigid nurse's cap, and she suggested peppermint oil as a digestive aid, and wheatgrass juice to fight cancer. She died from a failing heart weakened by too much self-medicating, and was buried in a Ditmas Park cemetery near the Beverly Road subway station. Her son never once visited.

An entire decade of *The Eagle* fit in one shallow drawer, one year per spool of microfilm. That's where Schuster was now. The paper's four-volume index, chained to the top of the cabinet, led her to pull the spool for 1952.

Two of the four microfilm readers had out of order signs taped to their dusty screens. A man older than her father sat at a third, shuffling through what looked like handwritten census records from an earlier century. He wore a coat with no buttons or zipper, as if they'd been torn away. His hair, slicked with Brylcreem pomade, was the color of dead grass. She sat beside him at the last machine and studied a diagram of circles and lines to learn how to load the film.

--I'm looking for my great-grandfather's property, the old man said. He spoke like he was on Thalidomide, too. He shook a decaying copy of *The History of the City of*

Brooklyn in her face. –He was a Van Brunt, one of the first settlers. Someone took his land.

She uncoiled a ribbon of film. –I’m sorry to hear that, she said. –I guess I live on a street named after him. Van Brunt Street.

--You’re on my grandfather’s property, he said. She thought he was going to tell her to get off his land, but he just shook the book at his own frosted, acrylic screen before scrolling through more pen-to-paper records.

He was the kind of character, her father would say, that made Brooklyn about as appealing as a clogged toilet. That’s why he and her mother had raised her in Long Island, until he met his next wife. The two of them ran away to sticky South Florida years ago, his young wife driving a car that seemed too old for her but was his favorite model.

She flicked a switch on her microfilm reader and it began to hum. The screen glowed as she slowly turned the dial that advanced the film to the first page published in 1952. But the words were blurry, inside-out. Like she was reading them underwater.

--You put it on upside-down, the old man said. He took a fountain pen from his breast pocket and rapped it against her screen, leaving behind a delicate, curling line.

--You have to do it this way, he said. He grabbed the spool from her machine and flipped it, wriggled the film beneath a glass plate and threaded it onto another spool. The dank smell of his breath hung between them.

--Try again, he said. She turned the dial until she saw words stacked the correct way. –Turn that blue knob and put it in focus, he said.

She wished her father could see that the people he thought were so terrible were really okay. They just smelled bad. –Thank you, she said. She wanted the man to find some way to reclaim his great-grandfather’s property, but more than that, she hoped he would find a coat that would keep him warm when the snow came.

Arnold Schuster was killed in March. She turned the dial as far to the right as it would go, and the weeks of 1952 sped across the screen. When she released the dial, she was in mid-February. She crept toward the next month. Her father would have been twelve years old.

SUTTON ‘FINGER MAN’ SLAIN NEAR HOME IN BOROUGH PARK. The first photo she found was of three men in outfits she’d only seen in movies—all fedora hats and brass buttons—standing over Arnold. One man gingerly raised the blanket that covered the body. But someone took the photograph from a distance, and Arnold’s forehead was the only part of him she could see. It was streaked with something dark, and blood pooled on the sidewalk—or maybe that was just a shadow. His necktie flopped over his shoulder. One of the men, however, stared down at Arnold’s face as if he’d never seen a body before.

She couldn’t understand why this modest bit of gore had such an impact on her father. He was a man who had taken her to scary movies, and a man who laughed after a rusty tire iron gored his thigh in a freak accident long ago. Or so he said. Now, she wondered if his eyes were shut all that time they spent together, through all those reels of horror films. She advanced to the next page.

SHOT FOUR TIMES, WITH TWO SLUGS PIERCING EYES. She knew she'd found the photograph her father had begun thinking of, now that he was older. The grainy condition didn't diminish the horror at all. Arnold was splayed across the newsprint sidewalk, his body bone-slack, his suit all folds and shadows, his mouth unhinged and spilling black. And his eyes—or where they used to be—were bullet holes tunneling through his brain. The caption was a quote from Arnold's father: *Oh my God, it can't be true. I want my Arnie! Mama, mama, no, no, no!* Arnold's face, turned as if posing for the photographer crouched beside him, didn't look like it could ever have once been alive.

She imagined her father's childhood nightmare: a sleek pistol pressed against Arnold's eyelid, felling him with one shot. The killer standing over Arnold, firing into the other eye. Arnold was just a twenty-five-year-old clothing salesman on his way home from the picture show. And though his eyes ceased to exist, the sockets still stared back at his killer with disbelief.

A voice came from every corner: the library would be closing early because of the storm. Not snow; storm. The old man gathered his books and papers, clutching them to his chest like they'd be his shield from the weather. —I have to get home, he said.

--Where's that? she asked.

--Van Brunt Street, he said. He shuffled away.

She printed a copy of the photo and the articles emblazoned by headlines in capitals. She scrolled through the rest of March to see if there were any more stories or

pictures of the crime. Instead, she found her grandmother smiling with her eyes, recommending skullcap tincture to relieve pain.

The sidewalk was already covered and the snow fell fast, erasing the footsteps of those who walked ahead of her. Passengers on the subway stood in personal puddles as snow melted off their boots. Her feet were wet and cold.

The wind was screaming through the street when she made it to her block. It blew a man's scarf off his shoulder and down his back. She remembered how Arnold's necktie lay to one side of his body.

She went inside just long enough to put the photo in an envelope. As she dropped it in the mailbox down the street, she thought the city was starting to look pretty dressed in white. But she was still wearing the wrong shoes, and she returned home. And then she didn't go outside for two days.

The storm brought the city to a standstill, a great blanket she couldn't kick aside. She thought she'd use the time to finish the projects on her apartment, because with so many half-hearted renovations, she didn't feel like she was home. Beneath her kitchen sink sat half a can of red paint, a color she'd thought would make her space feel soft and warm. But she could no longer see it the same way; it looked like blood dripping down the side of the can. She shut the cabinet, folded herself in her afghan and wondered what to do next. Only then did she remember that her grandmother had crocheted the afghan. Perhaps estrangement was another thing passed from generation to generation.

No mail arrived during those two days. Had the post office been unable to deliver mail, meaning Arnold was still in the box at the end of her block, or was it just her? She

didn't like the idea of him buried in there, but also worried that her father might think she'd forgotten about him. She tried to call him to explain, but she was put straight into voicemail.

She had no appetite, but knew she needed to find something fresh to eat. Her refrigerator was filled with containers of takeout she no longer recognized, so she put on her snow boots and stepped outside. Street plows had dumped the snow along the parked cars. A bus stop sign poked out of a snowdrift like a flag planted by an explorer. Pedestrians had created single-file pathways of packed snow on the sidewalks. She followed one to the grocery store, but when she arrived, she kept on going until she reached the subway station and rode out to Borough Park. There the streets still had not been plowed, the snow looking as fresh as if it had only fallen an hour before. She walked to the block where Arnold had died in 1952. But the snow was untouched, almost deceptively so. Footsteps in the snow faded as she approached Arnold's piece of sidewalk, and she dared not to walk on it herself. She was standing two miles away from where her father lived the day Arnold died, but she knew that for him, Arnold's destroyed body must have felt so much closer.

She wasn't home long before her father called. Wrapped in her grandmother's afghan, she set the kitchen timer. Four minutes.

--Did you get the article, and the picture? she asked.

--Yes, it's great, he said, his tongue still rough against his teeth. --My only problem is that I can't find the picture with the dog.

--Dog? What dog? she asked. She grabbed the timer, crusted with paint and floor glue, and added two more minutes.

--You know, the dog, he said. He sounded as if he was half awake and coming out of a dream.

She didn't remember any picture of a dog. What was he remembering— something worse than she already saw? A dog lapping blood off the sidewalk?

--Like a real dog? she asked. --I didn't find anything like that. Should I go back?

--With the dog, I guess I'm thinking of something else.

--What are you thinking of? she asked. The timer barely moved, yet she felt this was the most she'd ever had with her dad.

--No, it's okay, he said. --Thanks.

--Wait, tell me what you think you saw. Tell me how you remembered it. I really want to know.

He hung up. She wished the call had been followed by a dial tone, like in the days before cell phones, because she had been living in so much silence since the snow arrived. But then she couldn't remember if land lines ever actually did that, or if it was just a dramatic effect she'd seen in the movies. Still, that dial tone was a relic, a sound that indicated so many things. She just wanted to hear something, anything but her timer. She grabbed the dial and wrenched it past zero. Its insides broke with a sound like splintering bones. It would still tick, but it would never ring again.

On the day her father died, his wife told her he'd asked for a Catholic funeral mass. He never really stopped being Catholic, his wife said, though he never raised his

daughter that way. It was a religion he'd avoided until he reckoned he was going to need it, forever.

She wondered if either Arnold or her father got what they deserved, and sometimes, she'd answer: *yes*. But then, also, she wanted to ask: *Jesus, Arnie, why'd you have to get involved?*