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This thesis is a collection of stories examining the successes and failures of human connection. It portrays characters struggling to understand worlds, sometimes frightening and bizarre but always larger than themselves, and it investigates the desire for a sense of place and purpose among other human beings, as well as the daunting chasms that must be crossed when seeking to bridge these gaps.

THIRTY THOUSAND MILES ABOVE

By

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STEREOGRAMS

The on-call house was haunted. There were a handful of physicians, reasonable, un-superstitious people, who would not stay there overnight—but one woman did, a nurse practitioner who hadn't been at the institution for more than a month. If anybody asked her the reason why, she would say that it was good to confront things, even if you were afraid of them.

Allegedly, the ghost in the on-call house was that of the patient who had escaped through the institution's air duct seven years ago, stripped himself down to nothing on his way across the fallow—past the parking lot, past the greenhouses—and vanished into the icy woods on the other side. No one could catch him as he ran, throwing his arms out to the cold, palms up as though challenging the wind to come inside him. He drowned himself in the creek just north of the hospital, which was secluded, tucked into the Appalachian foothills as though it was a rock formation sculpted from nature that had always been there. The nursing staff would tell this story, each one relaying multiple versions, as though they had all rehearsed it.

On her first overnight visit to the on-call house, Nell brought her parakeet with her. The entire drive from her apartment in town to the hospital grounds, the bird beat its wings, singing with a nervous trilling voice, which she often preferred to the voices of

humans. The bird was just to get her comfortable. It was her goal to stay in the on-call house completely alone, no parakeet, by the end of the year. This was October.

That first evening, Nell was lugging her awkward, white-wire birdcage across the porch when she spotted a young man with a Polaroid camera around his neck, taking pictures. She knew him as CP, one of the interns, and as soon as he saw Nell standing there, one foot in the door, he took her picture as well, assaulting her with the flash. The bird, anxious already, screeched and beat at its cage.

“Why did you do that?” Nell asked, both blinded and upset that he hadn’t asked first. “You scared my bird.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, his face blank, unaware he had done anything wrong. “You make a good picture.” Then he ducked behind the corner of the house again, taking photographs of the clematis vines snaking their way up the clapboards. Nell wondered firstly if this man was doing this while he was supposed to be working, and she wondered secondly why anyone would consider her a good picture. She didn’t feel like a good picture, aware of the scars on her face and the twinge in her jaw, which had recently been wired. But CP was lanky in the way that teenage boys are lanky, gentle-faced behind his soft black beard, and Nell found herself putting down the birdcage and going around the side of the house to follow him.

CP let her see the picture he had taken of her when it developed. It was very blurred, to the point where Nell herself looked faceless, the birdcage a white smear in her arms, but all around were clear shapes, folding and eddying around themselves, like a pale lattice that had laid itself over the image.

“Oh,” CP said, his brow wrinkling.

“What is that?” Nell asked.

“Ghosts, I think.”

Nell looked at the picture and laughed. “Those aren’t ghosts. There’s something wrong with your camera.” Then she felt sorry for laughing when she saw that CP looked afraid, and then she herself felt a full, swarming sensation around them that she hadn’t noticed before, though she noticed it now. They stood in front of the on-call house, their shoulders pressed together, until the feeling subsided. CP took another photograph, and this time it was normal.

“What happened?” Nell asked.

“I don’t know,” CP said. “You should talk to Nurse Zorah, and she’ll tell you a thing or two about ghosts.”

“I want to know,” Nell said, wanting to be unafraid of the things that CP was afraid of.

CP was only twenty-five—too young, her mother would say through her teeth—but Nell was petite and girlish-looking, and, since her accident, had cut off all her hair in a chic bob. In the days after she met CP, she observed how he interacted with the staff, saw that he was eccentric but sharp, loved by his superiors and irritating to his peers, though he seemed to be making no real effort to reach out to either of them. In this, Nell admired him; she was partial to people who didn’t care what others thought about them. When he looked at her, also, she felt that he desired her, and while she wondered if he

had any idea that she was seven years his senior, she was pleased when he approached her a week after their initial meeting.

“Come to a movie with me,” he said.

She asked, “What kind of movie?”

He said, “Any kind you like.”

Oakwood’s central building was a gothic-windowed beast with a spiny grey back. It pushed up from the trees when approached from the highway, looking most appropriate in autumn with the fiery maples and sulfur-yellow sycamores all around, or shrouded in light snowfall, with dark rivulets of ice streaking down its façade. There was a statue of Minerva in the courtyard, a fountain that did not work, and a broad stone portico stanchioned with Corinthian columns. Alongside the building they had secured a wheelchair ramp, obscenely tacked-on while the stonework around it seemed ancient, threatening.

Nell found the structure intimidating, though a little hilarious, particularly when she went inside and saw that the facilities were modern and clean, a seafoam green tile floor, wide windows that let in a calm, diffused light, a comfortable nurses’ station, each room with spaces and angles that made it look larger than it was. She would spend most of her time in the women’s wing, but the medical director showed her everything, led her around to the garden and the greenhouses where the patients planted beans and herbs, which they sometimes sold locally, the activity rooms and the eerie on-call house that was just a hundred yards or so up the drive.

“A TV, but no cable,” the medical director said, trying to be jokey with Nell, who knew that she didn’t respond well to jokiness. “I watch all of my horror movies there. You should try it.”

But Nell said she didn’t like horror movies, not because they frightened her, but because they usually weren’t good.

Nell was younger than most of the physicians, older than the interns and the nursing technicians, at a strange middle ground and feeling as though she connected with no one. She had worked for five years at a hospital on the other side of the state and had recently quit, telling her mother and anyone else who asked that it was due to complications with the hospital’s payroll office, which could not keep track of her call hours and which underpaid her each month without fail. So Nell came here, to Oakwood.

Nell’s mother phoned from Maryland every week, nervous about her daughter’s transition, asking how her jaw felt, asking if she was sure she’d made the right decision. “It’s just a chilling thought,” she said, “you working at an asylum.”

“Mom,” Nell said. “They’re not called asylums anymore. It’s a mental facility.”

“Do you lobotomize people there?” she asked.

“Yes,” Nell said. “With ice picks. Through the eye socket.”

“That’s the most gruesome thing I’ve ever heard.” Nell should have known that her mother wouldn’t appreciate dark sarcasm.

“That isn’t true,” Nell said. “I was joking. But we do ECT, in some cases. The patient has to consent to it.”

“What is that? ECT.”

Nell weighted her voice, made it serious. “Electro. Convulsive. Shock. Therapy.” She could see her mother gripping the telephone cord on the other end of the line and still liked to stagger her with blood and gore stories from work, but, since Nell had entered into her thirties, she sometimes felt she was getting too old for it. Now it was more about, “Today I administered these medications. I conducted sixteen routine physicals. I obtained the medical history of a woman who claims to be pregnant and clearly isn’t.”

Her mother asked, “Aren’t you nervous to be in that building?”

“I’m not,” Nell said. “I feel pretty comfortable in it.”

In her first week, Nell received what she had been happily anticipating—crisis prevention and intervention training, the headlock escapes, the non-prone restraints—but incidents were rarer than she might have thought. Of course, Oakwood was not serene; Nell could not expect it to be. She had a head on her shoulders as straight as an arrow and the physicals she performed were efficient. She was terse. She would not stand for being lied to. Everyone asked for Vicaden, for Dramamine. A rail-thin woman with dirt under her nails complained every day: “The shit you gave me isn’t working. I’ve got so much pain. Hurts all the way down to my ass-bone.”

Nell heard this all the time, and the first few times she tried to figure out what was causing the pain before one of her superiors took her aside and explained that some patients always said this. The correct response was to fold your arms, stand almost imperceptibly on the balls of your feet and say: “You had a stack of pancakes as high as my knees this morning, Patty. Did it hurt then, too?”

She came to discover was that pity was rarely what any of them needed, and when the shit she gave them wasn't working, it was usually because the shit she gave *didn't have codeine in it*, and the only thing that could possibly fix the pain was a narcotic strong enough to put down a cow. There were so many liars in this place, liars and fakers. Nell was starting to believe that many of them suffered from nothing but severe personality flaws, that they simply wanted someone to take care of them.

This month, she intervened twice when fights broke out in the women's wing. She impressed everybody by the way she threw herself into the heart of it, arms flung out on either side of her, a tiny stick of a woman. She surprised the patients too, who never expected her to be as forceful as she was, and when a hoydenish woman twice Nell's size swiped at her, Nell forced her down against the tile floor and held her there like a child in the schoolyard. "I'm sorry!" the patient cried, emasculated. "I'm sorry!"

Nell told her mother about this event over the phone: "I felt like a superhero."

"How often do they try to hurt you?" her mother asked, and any time her mother brought this up their conversation devolved, ending with Nell bringing up again, with delight, how the patients had spread a rumor about her, hissing to one another in the recreation room that Nurse Patterson had gotten the scars on her face in a knife fight. A more elaborate rumor was that Nell had once been an assassin.

"And they believe that," said her mother.

"I guess," said Nell. "Many of them believe what they like."

So many of those patients, she thought, could function if they wanted to. A woman threatened to kill herself, the family put her in Oakwood. Drug addicts, agoraphobics,

hypochondriacs—they all ended up getting physicals from Nell. It seemed she had probed the vagina of every madwoman in ten counties, but Nell didn't say that to her mother.

Nell herself functioned beautifully, like a clock with gleaming parts. She didn't like that her mother was concerned. Every morning Nell woke up in her small house, which was seven miles east of the hospital in a borough that had not yet taken down last year's Christmas decorations from the lampposts. She stood on her porch with hazelnut coffee, her parakeet singing in its cage. She breathed in the air of the hills. She arched her back against the door jamb. October was a fresh month, a clean month. It was a month of expansion, for the world to come in through her doorway like a wind and for her to welcome it.

When Nell started seeing CP, he seemed to know that she was sensible. That first movie they saw together was a quasi-surreal romantic comedy, which played weakly with the notion of time travel.

"That movie was stupid," Nell said.

He shrugged. "It was all right."

"No," she said. "It was very stupid. It couldn't keep up with itself logically. If you're going to play with a timeline, it needs to be a *consistent* timeline. You can't just mix it up so that your characters can be together."

Eventually, she convinced CP that the movie was stupid. He laughed, said that she was disenchanting him.

All month long, they went on dates, saw other movies, until she finally came down into his basement, where he played the mandolin for her. Nell sat on a beanbag chair while CP played and sang “Ring of Fire” and “Absolutely Sweet Marie” and “Norwegian Wood.” He was all right, mediocre but sweet, and she applauded when he finished each song. Afterward, they kissed. His mouth and hands were hot, and Nell felt her own temperature rise from touching him. They peeled their clothes off of one another and had sex on the carpet, and when she came, a sharp spasm reawakened through the right side of her jaw, which she did not understand and did not mention.

She and CP lay on the floor next to each other, their bodies slick. “My band fell through,” he said. “That was way before med school. Ancient history.”

“That’s too bad.”

“We called ourselves The Trash Monsters. I wasn’t the singer. The girl who was the singer broke my heart. Honestly, I’ve been really guarded in my relationships since then.”

Nell didn’t think she could say, “That’s too bad,” a second time, so she only nodded.

“I don’t tell many people that,” CP said. “Have you ever had a broken heart?”

“No,” Nell said. “Not really.”

CP reached out and ran his fingertip along the side of her face, skirting the edges of her scars. For the most part, she did enjoy his company, but sometimes the conversations they had made Nell feel like she was moving heavy bricks around. CP wanted something from her, but she couldn’t tell what it was. He had shown her scars from his

childhood: knee, elbow, and thumb. Now he wanted to know about her scars as well. He was tracing his finger along her jaw and over the bridge of her nose.

“A bicycle accident,” she said. “They’re old.”

“They don’t look old,” he said.

Nell didn’t reply.

“Why are you blocking me out?” he asked. “Do you see this going anywhere?”

When she was silent again, he gave her a cutting, damaged look, got up and put his mandolin in his naked lap. He clutched it to his chest as a child would. “You shouldn’t lead people on like that,” he said.

Nell sat up, her cheeks flaring in anger. “How did I lead you on?” she asked.

“You asked juvenile questions.”

“I thought I saw something about you that was warmer,” he told her, strumming a chord.

Nell took this as something a young person who didn’t understand much about other people would say; she was much older than him, after all. When Nell came up from CP’s basement, she knew that they would not be going to places together anymore, and all the rest of the night she felt heat and pressure behind her eyeballs, and something in her had been torn through, though she was convinced that she had very little in common with this man. There was no reason for her to be this angry.

But it was Nell who had the Polaroid camera, which CP had let her borrow after she expressed interest in the ghosts around the on-call house.

*

November was the month when Nell woke up in that house and felt something. The parakeet was silent, its head tucked underneath its fragile green wings.

There was a rare fullness in the room that only exists when you are among people who know you well, when you are connected and aware of others and everyone understands what everybody else is thinking. Nell was as well aware of these ghosts—she could feel them; they were crowding around her—as she was her own body. But perhaps this was what they were, Nell’s own body, multiples of Nell, quantum Nells born every time an atom decayed and a new universe bubbled up into being. There existed an infinite number of them.

Nell took CP’s Polaroid camera from the bedside table and snapped a photo of the opposite wall. The parakeet fluttered its wings when the flash went off.

There! The photo developed and she could see the ghosts inside, trembling shapes at the edges of the frame, like animals hiding themselves in a garden, inviting your eyes to find them. Nell rose from the bed and snapped more photos throughout the on-call house, linoleum kitchen and tiny, tiled bathroom. So many ghosts! When the photos developed they were always at the edges of the frame, distorted fish-eyed forms begging her to search them out and understand them. Nell *would* understand; she would clarify and conquer. She had every light in the on-call house burning when she burst from the front door, barefooted on the ice-whitened steps. She snapped her photos into the darkness, up the drive where the brooding silhouette of the hospital stood.

So many!

But the shapes became thinner and fewer. When her last photo developed, there was nothing in it but the black woods and the gravel drive, which glowed pale from the camera flash. The ghosts had paid their visit and moved on, and there was only Nell standing on the pathway.

She took the photos and pinned them up on the wall so that she could stand back and look at them all at once. The following weeks, CP left her a note at the nurse's station, saying that he wanted the camera back and that the film was very expensive; he had to order it from a catalog. Nell kept an eye on CP's shifts so that she could avoid seeing him at work, but there was something pleasurable about the idea of him having to work to seek her out. Only then would she give him back what he wanted.

Ghoulish things lived all throughout the hospital. The drowned man was the first, but there were many others.

Surrounding the grounds was a palpable miasma. The deer and the wood rabbits would never come into the field adjacent, and even the grackles would not sit long on the power lines across the road without shifting their feathers restlessly. In the summer, no ladybugs or hummingbird moths came around the azalea bushes in the courtyard.

Nell, knowing now what resided here, snapped a picture of a blue Pontiac Tempest parked across the road, which belonged to Dr. Easter, one of the psychiatrists in the women's wing. Dr. Easter's windows were cracked, and when the photograph developed, Nell could see the ghosts getting in, settling down in the back seat. They followed people home and no one knew.

*

Nell became intrigued enough to approach Nurse Zorah, the woman that CP had told her about. Nurse Zorah had deep, round eyes, gray like cigarette ash, and a tiny, heart-shaped mouth; the smell of soap and dust enveloped her gently, like an eggshell. Capital “N” Nurse Zorah. Nell had never heard her called anything else.

At the nurse’s station, Nurse Zorah told Nell about a Mrs. Hammerfield, who had shown cyanosis the evening before but was breathing regularly now. Nell found herself announcing abruptly, “Someone told me you know about the ghosts.”

Nurse Zorah looked at her. She was a quiet woman, so serene, and everything she said seemed thoughtful. “The ghosts,” she said. “Yes ma’am. Why do you want to know about the ghosts?”

“Have you seen them?” Nell asked, taking a few of the photos out of her breast pocket so that Nurse Zorah could see.

Nurse Zorah took an interest, or at least seemed to. When Nell let her see the photos, she laid them out in front of her on the counter of the nurse’s station, bedroom, dark woods, blue Pontiac Tempest. All those pale, furred shapes, as tremulous as amoebas. As she looked them over, Nurse Zorah asked Nell, in a tepid matter: “Why are you interested?”

“No one else is?” Nell said. She would have liked for Nurse Zorah to be a seer, a mediator for the ghosting world.

“Can I keep these?” Nurse Zorah asked. “I want look at them more closely.”

“Oh,” Nell said. “All right.”

Nurse Zorah put the photos in a neat stack and tucked them into the breast pocket of her scrubs. When she did this, she performed a witchy movement with her hands, as though brushing them clean of dirt. And her face, Nell could not read her face.

Nell wished sometimes that people didn't have expressions. She found that people's faces often portrayed the opposite of what they were feeling, what their intentions were; expressions were the most effective lies. Nell couldn't tell the difference between a smile that was genuinely happy and a smile that was lying. Who could? People said they could, but they couldn't really.

For example, at the downtown hospital across the state where Nell had worked previously, they had their share of characters—junkies and gangbangers and schizoids—coming in, wearing their soiled army jackets, their dreadlocked beards and ragged fingernails. Nell had always considered herself very effective at determining who was a threat and who was harmless, and Mr. Grant she had always liked, the one who said “Hey pretty” to all the female staff members and told them to smile if they weren't smiling, because it was a blessed day.

Mr. Grant came in with a knife wound and when she came to examine him, he smiled, his eyes large and round. He said, “It's a blessed day,” and she said, “Yes, it is,” and when she asked him to open up his shirt, he struck the butt of his fist against her nose and slammed her face up against the wall. When she came to, three technicians were restraining Mr. Grant, and Nell was on the floor, aching, her face awash with blood. She

had urinated on herself. Mr. Grant thrashed his legs about as they dragged him away. He was smiling still.

Nell hadn't considered herself close with any of the staff at her previous hospital. When she recovered and returned to work, it was their faces that struck her, again and again—their smiles, supposedly sympathetic, the way they spoke to her delicately, as though she might burst. She could see her face striking the wall in each pair of sensitive, watery eyes, and this was worse, she thought, than the moment when it took place.

When she took her new job, she wrote a letter to a nurse at the previous hospital, to whom she had been acquainted: "I am now working at Oakwood, a mental facility. Please tell everyone that all is well here." She felt relieved when the nurse never wrote back.

It was hard to say that the ghosts in the photographs looked like anything. They were, in a sense, formless, at first glance smooth, curved shapes, at second glance, jagged, at third, a series of loops and lines, layered over one another. If Nell stared long and hard at those photographs, she sometimes saw ugly smiling faces in the darker shapes at the corners, but only sometimes. Usually, she could find the shapes of more pleasant things: her mother by the kitchen windowsill in Maryland, coffee cups and orange slices, Academy boys she had dated in nursing school, the blurred runners of her high school track team.

Nurse Zorah, who rarely spoke with anybody about the ghosts, began to show the photographs around, saying that Nell, the new nurse practitioner, was taking them. And

they didn't see what Nell saw. They saw what they would rather not speak about, not to anyone: snakes, sharp things, their absent fathers, their drunken mothers, their children in jails or in ditches, household pets decayed in their graves, the deeply loved and long-dead.

Nell thought it was invasion, the way Nurse Zorah showed the photographs off to others. It had never been Nell's intention to spread the ghosts around; she thought that they were hers, her secret connection to an ether-world. And though she didn't know what the rest of the staff saw when they looked at these pictures, she could sense that they thought there was something improper about the way she was bringing ghosts into the workplace, dangerous even. It hurt Nell, because there was such a good shape in there if you looked, a kind and definitive shape. Turned the right way, it was like a stereogram, those Magic Eye puzzles; the image popped up as though it wanted you to find it.

Nell told herself that she hated Nurse Zorah for spreading the photos around, and she gave her cold looks whenever she walked by the nurse's station. But really, Nell wanted Nurse Zorah to come up and apologize for what she had done so that Nell could forgive her. And who knew what Nurse Zorah saw looking at those photographs; Nell thought she'd seen her smiling with the corner of her mouth, so maybe she saw the good shape, just as Nell did. Maybe this meant that they were similar.

Those of the staff who perceived awful things when they looked at the photos were wary and wide-eyed, affected, impractical people and they thought about the awful things they had seen too often. They clustered in groups in the break room and cried into one another's necks when they were upset, when the patients spat in their faces or called

them cunts. They talked about their dreams—I had a dream once that I dug a tunnel and hid inside of it for days; I dreamed I was so angry I set my house on fire; I dreamed I went up into space in a hot air balloon and my children and ex-husband were with me—we were all a family still—and when I woke up I was so sad that it wasn't real. Nell drank coffee on her porch and thought often about the on-call house. She did not remember her dreams.

In late November, they had a party for someone at the nurse's station. Nell sat on the counter with the rest of the staff talking all around her, and she knew that the woman's name was Kathleen and that it was her forty-third birthday. She didn't know much else. One person gave Kathleen a bonsai tree as a gift.

"I've got the touch of death when it comes to plants," Kathleen said.

"Oh, this one is hardy," said the gift-giver. "It's a succulent, I think."

"I kill fish," another nurse spoke up. "Every Chinese fighting fish I've had has wound up dead."

"I have a parakeet," Nell said.

The nurses looked up from their conversation, their jovial circle, staring at Nell as though her comment had not been welcome. Their blank, frosty eyes made Nell angry, and when they went back to talking, as though Nell had said nothing at all, she took a plate of cake and went outside to eat it in the cold, swallowing large bites despite the tightness in her throat.

After a while, Nurse Zorah came out. Something in Nell's chest leapt at the thought of a conversation, the apology that was coming, that was needed.

“Sorry ma’am,” Nurse Zorah said. “I just ran into CP. He says he wants his camera back.”

The thing in Nell’s chest that had leapt disintegrated. “He can come find me if he wants it,” she said.

“But he wanted me to tell you,” Nurse Zorah said, “to put it in his locker by Friday.”

Now it was December and the nursing staff did not speak unless they had to. They knew her as the woman who took pictures of ghosts, but now Nell had run out of film and was going around to different places in town, trying to find where she could order more. At work, more often now, she took out the stack of photographs to look at them in the break room.

CP would not call her about the camera. He would not send her any messages, as she thought he surely would. “Well,” she said to herself, and tore her phone jack from the wall. “Even if you wanted to call me, now you can’t.” In doing this, she missed talking to her mother that Sunday, who called terrified at the hospital, thinking that something had happened.

“Nothing *happened*,” said Nell when she was given the phone at work. “I’ve been busy. It has to do with a man.”

Her mother released her breath. “Oh,” she said. “Oh, I see. Well that’s wonderful.” Wonderful particularly, she didn’t say, because it was the first time Nell had men-

tioned seeing a man since her injury. She had not told her mother about the photos. She didn't know how her mother would react to them.

In December, the drowned man appeared to her. No more hidden by a trellis of blurs or fuzzy lines, no more a hidden shape to discover. Nell woke in the night to the sound of her parakeet beating its wings against its cage, but she remembered that she had taken the bird back home the week before. She was alone.

Dense with sleep, Nell propped herself up on her elbows and saw a nude man at the foot of her bed, lazy-eyed, his lips bluish and swollen. He was older than she thought he would be, bald at the crown of his head with whitish fuzz around his ears, sagging and sunken and dying.

"I've been looking for you," Nell said. "What did you come to tell me? I'll listen."

The ghost opened his mouth to speak, but it was stuffed full with leaves and mud and acorns from the stream where he had drowned. Nell felt a shudder of pain in her chest when she saw this.

"Say something," she said. "Tell me something. I've been looking for you."

But he didn't make a sound. And despite all of the physicals she had performed, despite her familiarity with the body, its functions, all of the piss and shit she'd dealt with, Nell lifted her knee so that she could not see the man's privates in front of her. His nudity was severe. It frightened her more so than his ghostliness.

“Go back to your creek, old man,” she said, then rolled over on her side, clenched her eyes tight, and willed herself to sleep again.

Nurse Zorah had said things before about the ghost of the drowned man, some years ago, back when she still held gatherings in the break room during the on-call hours, back when nobody took ghosts so seriously. The more adventurous staff members who said they weren't afraid would attend, and she would lean over the lamplight and speak to them, nurses and technicians, even a bright-eyed intern or two, and, on occasion, one of the out-patients living in the apartments down the road.

“This man,” Nurse Zorah said. “They kept him in solitary for two weeks. Whenever they opened the door, he would scream at them, ‘Listen to me! Listen to me!’ But if one of the nurses asked, ‘What? What is it?’ he could only stare and say ‘I’m speaking. Can’t you hear me speaking?’”

The young men and women would look at each other and smile, shivering their shoulders, feigning fear. They would pass shortbread cookies to one another.

“Well, now,” Nurse Zorah said. “Silly women like me, we try to summon the drowned man to divine answers from him. But I tell you now; there’s still nothing he can say. His death has rendered him silent.”

“Come out of the house,” CP said. “Come out, Nell.”

Nell was working over the holidays, and CP was outside the door of the on-call house. He could see her car, frosted in the driveway, so he knew she was inside. She sat

below the window, anxious to open the door for him, unsure what she would say, having held his camera captive for so long. The ghosts, where were they? Had they moved on and left her?

“I’m going to make you pay for all that film you used,” CP said. “I’m going to bust down this door if you don’t answer me.”

Nell laughed. “Go ahead. Come in here and get your camera.”

“I will.”

“Do it,” she said.

CP went silent to consider her challenge. She heard a muffled *bang!* as he slammed his shoulder into the door. He groaned. She peered over the window ledge to see that he was staggering off the porch, clutching his arm. Nell’s beeper sounded, summoning her to the women’s wing.

“CP,” she said. “Do you want to meet up later today?”

“No,” he said. “I want you to give me the camera now.”

“We can talk later. I’ll pay for the film I used. I’ll take you out to lunch.”

“I don’t want to talk. I don’t want to get lunch. I want the camera now.”

“Not now,” she said. “Not right now. I’m using it now.”

CP saw her looking at him over the window ledge, sneered at her. “I’ll come back for it. You can’t just steal my things.”

He wandered away, and she waited a minute before leaving the house and heading up the road to the hospital. It was snowing, and a white dust had gathered on the holly bushes by the front steps, and she had opened the door when CP came out from behind

them, their spiny leaves stuck to his jacket. He gripped her wrist, not harshly, but with a smile that implied he had outsmarted her, conquered her, and his fingers on her skin felt like needles. She whipped her free arm around and pushed him down the steps. And when he was down and astonished and in pain, she raised her arm to strike him again. And now there was a cluster of nurses and physicians in the entryway, all staring, and some were shouting, and there were patients in the windows, their mouths open and laughing.

“I told you,” Nell said. “I told you I was still using it. The camera. I need it.” CP stared up at her, his wide eyes darting between her face and her forearm.

“Nurse Patterson,” said one of the physicians.

“What?” Nell said, breathless.

The physician came forward. “Nurse Patterson, what happened here?”

When he reached for her arm, she ducked away and tore off across the courtyard, a sheet of snow and frozen leaves underfoot. She kept on across the fallow until she had reached the edge of the woods, then turned around to face the hospital, as though she would charge it like an ox, but her legs were weak, paralyzed, her shirt wet around the collar and the armpits. Immobile at the edge of the woods, she rested on her knees and waited for her composure to return.

An icy mist encircled the hospital, and through the fir trees that lined the drive, she could see the on-call house. She sat watching to see if someone—something—would stretch across the empty space of the field to reach her, but all that rose up to meet Nell

were dim faces, because she could make them out everywhere, in the trees, the ground and the snow clouds.

THE DEATH OF LAUREL HINES

It was early on a Saturday when Emery told his wife that one of his students had died. He wasn't sure why he was telling this to Kay, explaining that Laurel Hines had committed suicide two nights ago in her apartment, because Kay had probably already seen Laurel's pixilated face in that morning's paper, homely, smiling with her small overbite. As he spoke, Emery heard his own voice, slow and heavy despite his effort to seem detached from the incident, and his sadness, he could tell, irritated Kay. "Laurel is dead."

Kay stood in the kitchen doorway and gave him a steady look, her face unwashed, still greasy from sleep. "I saw about her," she said.

"It's an awful thing," he said.

"It is awful," said Kay.

That morning Macie, who was eleven, made omelets, had chopped the onions and green peppers herself with mechanical precision. Emery had taught their daughter to make omelets. She maneuvered the spatula like a professional. Nowadays, she wanted to take part in any and all adult conversations she overheard, but sometimes she still asked frank, child's questions that took a certain amount of cleverness and tact to answer.

"She killed herself? Why? Why would anyone do that?"

Emery could answer this. He had always been skilled at explaining things to Macie, far better than he was at explaining things to Kay, in fact. He said, “Because people sometimes get very sad.”

“I get sad, too,” said Macie. “Everyone does.”

Kay watched over the rim of a coffee cup, saying nothing. She was probably waiting for Macie’s child logic to make suicide seem like a ridiculous thing to do, to make Laurel Hines herself look ridiculous. Kay believed in child logic, thought that it was superior to Emery’s logic, and that Laurel Hines’s suicide was ridiculous.

“Well,” said Emery. “This student of mine was depressed for a very long time. And sometimes when that happens, people lose hope and forget they were ever happy.”

He then showed Macie the picture of Laurel in the paper. There was something disappointing about her picture, Emery thought, and the obit also, which failed to fabricate any grandness surrounding Laurel’s life. Laurel had not been a grand person, and there was something painfully antiheroic about the suicides of girls who were not beautiful and who had not led exciting lives.

Macie tilted her head at the monochrome photograph. “She looks happy here,” she said.

Emery taught a leadership lab at Baylor’s School of Nursing in the city, educating students on how best to treat and interact with their patients. Laurel Hines had been in this lab, always sitting at the back of the classroom by herself, always reluctant to speak up during simulations and group work. Emery had wondered for a while if he was at-

tracted to Laurel Hines. It would be strange if he was, since Emery wasn't sure if he could pinpoint any one quality Laurel had that would cause him to have romantic feelings for her.

He'd learned more about her when she asked him to help her outside of class, since she did poorly on the first exam, and the lab was required to graduate the program. When she approached him, her voice was small but pleasant, like a bell: "I don't know the answers you're looking for."

It wasn't uncommon for students to say this. Emery had told plenty of young women that he didn't want to see a regurgitated answer that he himself had fed to them. Nurses dealt with complex situations. A regurgitated answer on an exam was a D at best. Laurel seemed to understand and she said she would do better, though she didn't do better on the next assignment, or the next, and she came to him after class again and again so that he could talk her about what to do, step-by-step. She would thank him, and sometimes lapse, timidly, into talking about herself.

He supposed that she was not anything like Kay. Laurel was rarely to the point and never impolite. She was not inventive or spontaneous. She limited herself to one cup of coffee every three days, she said. She wore boating shoes, though she was afraid of the water. She was afraid of a number of things, especially bees, to which she was allergic. Her face went red whenever she talked, to the point where Emery felt uncomfortable experiencing her incredible shyness.

"It doesn't mean I'm embarrassed," she told him some time later. "I mean, I then get embarrassed because I realize I'm blushing, but it's like my face goes pink any time I

talk, or any time I'm nervous or excited. And I want to tell people that I'm not embarrassed. I'm just feeling something."

By the time Laurel told Emery this, she had begun wearing silken shirts with low necklines, cleavage revealed, colored scarves wrapped around her hair, which was a dim blond, the color of walnut shells. She sprayed herself down with a sugary, cucumber scent, the kind of scent that teenagers wore. Emery noticed these things, but he had not questioned the reason for them. He only knew that he was very good at explaining things, and Laurel did not seem to be learning much of anything in their study sessions.

It was probably Kay who first realized that Laurel might be not learning on purpose. His wife met her only once, during what Emery had classified as an okay-month for the two of them, a time when Kay was willing to drive all the way from the publishing office where she worked part-time to the medical institute to bring Emery a stack of graded papers he'd forgotten back at home. Though she did this for him, she still wasn't happy that he had asked her to. She railed against the inner city traffic—the goddamn *fucking* traffic—as she stepped into his office, and it took her a moment before she spotted Laurel sitting there with a plastic binder in her lap, her hair teased and fluffed out, the cucumber smell curling around her like an haze.

Laurel turned an excruciating pink when Emery introduced her. "My wife, Kay." He remembered feeling uneasy about Laurel's lack of emotional restraint. Did she have to go red like that, really? Kay noticed things about people. It was her talent, her habit, rather, of divining elaborate stories from the details that others didn't notice, and it was true—Emery probably even knew it at the time, but wouldn't admit it to himself—that

Laurel had other motives. Kay didn't say anything about it until that night, when they stood across the bedroom from one another, she hugging her elbows.

“That girl's making passes at you,” she said.

He laughed the statement off, inwardly unnerved by its firmness.

“Are you saying you don't notice?” she said.

And when Emery, with his graying temples, his dark fringe of a beard, said, “I'm forty-five years old. That girl is twenty-two. I'm just flattered she thinks I'm still a good-looking man,” Kay flung the toiletries off of the bathroom counter with a fierce sweep of her arm.

“You're out of your mind,” he said, and she went downstairs, wheeled from the driveway and did not return until well after three in the morning. He heard the fragmented voices of late night television rising up from the den and knew she had fallen asleep on the sofa. The next morning, they pretended that they hadn't fought.

What actually transpired between Laurel and Emery could not have been more scandalous than the notions Kay thought up. What a clumsy event it was, the time when Laurel caught up with him in the stairwell, a couple of days after meeting his wife. “I didn't know you were married,” she said, but this was a lie, and she blushed when she told it. “I'm not the kind of person that takes risks. But I'll risk it if something really feels right, if it feels appropriate.”

This was how Laurel described her advances on Emery. They felt “appropriate.” She had risked as she put her fingers on the back of his neck and risked as she had kissed him, and, with one hand on the buckle of his belt, she had risked. But if he remembered

now, they were frail attempts, desperate in nature, and hidden in the stairwell between the fourth and fifth floor of the laboratory building, Emery had rejected her. He had pushed her hands away from his belt buckle and had said, “It’s *not* appropriate, Laurel.”

Now, he found himself strangely alone after Laurel’s death and his sadness, his slow voice, made Kay all the more suspicious of him. It was not an affair, what happened between him and Laurel Hines. It was barely anything. It was not right for Kay to drive around the city in the middle of the night, swearing at the darkness, as though he had ruined everything, or for her to look at him always in that accusatory Kay manner.

Macie was doing very well in her upper level science class. She’s pulled off a mediocre performance on the aptitude test for the upper level English classes and Kay said she worried that their daughter had done this on purpose so that she could be in class with her best friend, Amber Holliday.

“I can just see them now,” Kay had said, “sitting at the back of the classroom just giggling their heads off together. They won’t learn anything. The teacher’s up at the front of the room trying to go over the reproductive system of frogs and they’re just—”

“Why would they be giggling?” Emery asked.

“They’re always giggling,” Kay said. “Haven’t you noticed? I’m shocked any time Macie and that Amber girl *aren’t* giggling. And you know if the teacher says the word ‘reproductive,’ oh, it’s all over then. They’re in hysterics. They’re not learning anything.”

Emery had even heard Kay confront Macie about this, as though it was still an option to drop out of the science class and take the English class instead. The class placement was a done deal. Macie would be taking these with the same children all year long.

“You’ve never even liked science that much,” Kay had said.

“I love science,” Macie said defensively, and, as though to prove Kay wrong, Macie would bring science tidbits to the dinner table, stamping her fork into her pork chop like an explorer rooting her flag in undiscovered ground. “Mom,” she’d say. “Mrs. Greenstone said today that most of what we see is empty space. And the only thing that keeps us from passing through walls is electric charges. And she said, too, that emotions are electric charges and chemicals and things.”

“That’s interesting,” said Kay, flatly. But Emery could see, with some amusement, that such erudition unsettled Kay more than it interested her.

When Macie was younger, she’d had a habit of drawing imaginary creatures. Kay encouraged this; she said that imagination and creativity were liberating qualities that children would lose if you didn’t exercise them regularly. So Macie drew creatures by the dozen and taped them up on her wall, sharing the details of their lifestyles and diets with Kay, inventing whole universes for them. Emery hadn’t found any of these things a *problem*, but he couldn’t help but feel proud and relieved when Macie’s interest in fictional friends ebbed, and she began to make real ones.

Kay didn’t like most of Macie’s new friends, especially Amber Holliday, who gabbed about boys, the pretty, effeminate teenagers from television and movies—“She’s ten years old,” Kay said. “What the hell is wrong with her?” And Macie’s imagination

became crowded out with the plotlines of the high school dramas that she watched at Amber's house, even though Kay told her she didn't want her watching those shows.

"She doesn't think anymore," Kay complained to Emery, but another thing that Emery was exceptionally good at doing was diffusing arguments.

"Macie still thinks," he would say. "She doesn't necessarily think the way *I* think or *you* think, but she thinks. Have a little faith in her."

Of course, Emery didn't mind that Macie now had to do projects on the endocrine system, on which he possessed extensive information. He would lend her books, plastic models, medical utensils and CD-ROMs that he had borrowed from the university. He would sit at the coffee table with her and congratulate her if she solved math problems without her fingers twitching to count the numbers out, and her face would light up hearing his approval.

And it was wrong, he knew, to think of Kay as opposition, as an obstacle. And it was wrong to look back, to think about how well they'd gotten along years ago, how they had admired and trusted in their differences, and to sense now that he hated her differences, hated Kay. His hatred had accumulated slowly, like grains of sand on a beach, but it was in this time, the same time when Laurel Hines was his student, that Emery began to understand it as something that wouldn't leave him.

That same week Macie learned of Laurel Hines's death, she and Amber Holliday constructed a filter in the living room. It was a project, they explained. They had to run water through a tube and have it come out clearer on the other side. They had to use four

materials—they had chosen gravel, tree bark, cheese cloth and mothballs—and the group with the clearest water in the class got extra credit.

It was Kay who came into Emery's office downstairs and told him that Macie wanted a final okay on her filter before she turned it in. "It looks all right to me," she said, smiling. "But I'm no one to offer advice on science projects."

Emery thought she said this in a challenging manner, though everything that came out of Kay's mouth since Laurel's death seemed like a challenge to him, even requests to put the silverware in the drawer, even compliments on his tie, and he couldn't shake his fear of an impending battle.

"We'll look at it then," he said, his voice wary, and he followed his wife into the living room, where Amber and Macie stood looking their filter over.

There was a certain kind of resourceful engineering that went into building fifth-grade science projects, and Emery remembered these sorts of assignments from back in grade school, when he could use his hands, assemble and reassemble. He wanted to dive in and show Macie how it was done, to have her face light up again and again.

"We're using hamster tubes," Amber explained. "Since Skittles died. We washed the tubes real good so they're clean, don't you think?"

"Dad?" Macie said, turning to Emery. "Are hamster tubes okay?"

Emery scratched the side of his cheek, delivering his input. "It's a great idea," he said. "But mothballs are poisonous. You won't want to drink the water that comes out of there."

“Poisonous?” Macie said. “Well, that’s not good.” She attempted to disassemble the plastic tubes, forcing them apart and cracking one along the edge. “Shit,” she said. A cluster of mothballs pattered on the carpet at her feet.

“You butthead,” Amber said heatedly. “You should have just left it alone. It’s not like anybody’s going to actually be *drinking* the water.”

Emery sensed that Kay was right about Amber Holliday, this friend of Macie’s who spoke as though all of her statements were sharp observations when they usually were not. Amber had a loud, Southern voice, and she wore loud colors, banana yellows, magentas, chartreuses. Emery liked to think that he was always better at handling Amber’s loudness than Kay was, though right now Kay watched with arms folded as Amber and Macie fought over the science project and began to shoot personal barbs at one another.

“You’re the one who brought the mothballs,” Macie said.

“And I said we should have done this at my house because it’s bigger,” Amber said.

Emery took the hamster tube from Macie. “There’s no need to start a fight about this. It’s a tiny crack.”

“But we lose points if any water leaks out,” said Macie.

“Then we’ll find a way to fix it,” he said. He stooped down and gathered the mothballs into his hand. “We’ll figure this out.”

Emery’s calming voice had a positive effect, as it usually did. In another ten minutes, Macie and Amber had apologized to one another for making accusations, and in

another half hour they were best friends again, singing the opening theme of a TV show they liked, Macie the alto, Amber the soprano. They worked out fine details of the project through much of the evening, duct taping all the orange-plastic crevices where the water might leak. At some point Kay went upstairs to her office to work, and Emery fine-tuned the project triumphantly at his daughter's side long after Amber's mother came to pick her up. They laughed and celebrated their own ingenuity, Emery helping Macie drill the hamster tubes into an upstanding square of plywood to stabilize everything. Macie thanked him. They finished their work after Kay had gone to bed.

Macie surprised Emery after he'd told her goodnight, and they stood in the upstairs hallway, sleepy and satisfied with their accomplishment. She said, "I've been thinking about your student that died."

"Why?" Emery asked, though it was true that he and Kay had discussed it in the house a couple of times, and its dark subject matter pervaded like a bad smell. Kay had, in a weirdly voyeuristic fashion, asked for details, the story about how Laurel stopped coming to the lab (this was a month or so after Emery rejected her, though he kept this to himself). A week after she disappeared, a colleague told him that Laurel had blown out the pilot light of her gas oven, asphyxiating herself. Kay had referred to this as the "Plath Path" in a moment that Emery wished Macie hadn't overheard and Kay hadn't obliged to explain, though to her credit, she seemed embarrassed as she tried to reroute the conversation into a lesson about why Macie couldn't operate the old ranch house stove when Mom and Dad weren't in the kitchen.

In all of this, Emery still worried that he wore his thoughts of Laurel Hines on his face, that anybody who saw him would be able to see the girl's death following him around.

"I've been thinking about death and stuff," Macie said. "Thinking about why someone would kill themselves."

"You don't need to be worrying about those things, Macie."

"I know that. I just am. Did you like that girl?"

What a strange question. Did he like her? Was Laurel Hines, gentle, unsure, and miserable under her smiles, was she likeable? Emery said, "I did like her. She was a good student." He hesitated. "She was learning. And you should always admire people who want to learn."

Macie nodded slowly as though she understood the situation completely, which was a trait she had gotten from Kay. She would be more like Kay in a couple of years when she became a teenager, dark, smoky-eyed and surly, Emery had a feeling, and then he might lose his ability to interact with her, to explain things.

As he brushed his teeth in the bathroom, Kay sleeping death-like in their bed, he thought about the time Laurel had caught him in the stairwell, when he had told her no. He went on thinking, found himself imagining what it might have been like to have sex with Laurel. He assumed that her apartment was plain and neat, like her, with shy white curtains that moved with the air vents. She would be nervous and would not arch her back until the end. She would not try vigorously to climax and would instead shrink beneath him as though she was still ashamed, just a little, stretching her throat with a soft

cry. Kay's fucking had never been that way, Kay the Media Studies major at Wilmington, who would see him in public at coffee shops downtown, who would slide herself into his lap, her dark pencil jeans worn like skin, thick gray sweaters with holes in them. Emery was so thin and Kay so tall, they'd weighed about the same then. "Put your hand on my thigh," she'd say. But she's say it slyly, as though she was trying to trick him, a tone of voice that was so different from the quaking whisper of Laurel Hines.

A girl who sat near the front of Emery's classroom whispered something about seeing Laurel sitting by herself at a party, drink and cigarette at hand. She regretted not talking to her then, said she was going to the memorial service. Emery hadn't attended that service, and while he feared that guilt would overcome him, it never came to the extent he thought it would. He did not blame himself for Laurel's suicide, and he actually found himself thinking that it really *had* been a ridiculous thing for her to do. Had she waited, had she been more persistent, had she mustered up her courage to try again, he wondered if she might have gotten what she wanted from him.

The following morning, Macie's filter stood like a shrine on the living room sofa, fully-constructed, functional, a silly-looking monstrosity as fifth-grade science projects often were. Emery gave it a final glance-over before leaving to go to his morning class, and he felt almost as proud of himself as he did of Macie.

Macie came home with two extra credit points for the fourth-clearest water in the class, a placing that had not made Amber Holliday happy. Macie said that Amber had put up a fit about the mothballs, that they would have worked a lot better than the makeup

pads they'd used to replace them. They'd fought, and Amber had given up on arguing like a logical person, and everything Macie said was wrong because Amber's father was a lawyer and her grandfather owned a golf course.

"But it was a success, wasn't it?" Emery asked at dinner, feeling let down to hear about yet another tumultuous crisis in the Amber-Macie relationship, though it didn't surprise him.

"I guess," said Macie. "But I know I wouldn't have drunk anything out of a filter made of hamster tubes. You know how he died, right? Skittles was like, diseased and molting and crap."

Kay looked up her meal. She laughed. She looked at Emery and grabbed his hand, and when he felt her laughter shaking in her body, he laughed with her. Though, in truth he didn't like that Macie had so easily discredited her own ingenuity.

Emery didn't think that eleven-year-olds should be sheltered from the subject of death or suicide, especially not a child as bright as Macie. When she was four, back when they were still living on the East Coast, she had encountered in the street near their house a dead tabby cat. Macie had led Emery to it, more out of curiosity than worry.

Emery crouched down when Macie pointed to the carcass. "It was probably hit by a car," he explained. "Death is what happens when the body can't work anymore."

Macie seemed confused. "That happens to people, too?"

Emery nodded. "Yes," he said. "It happens to everyone."

"But what happens to *you* if your body can't work?"

Macie's question made Emery stop to think. This was why so many parents taught their children about heaven. The *you* of a human was more than the body. It was thought. It was feeling. And it was so much easier describing an afterlife than the process of decay, where all soft tissues dissolve into the soil to replenish it. Emery himself was not a man of religion and he didn't really believe in God. But he recognized the complexity of this situation and told Macie, "You go to a place called heaven. Everyone is happy there, and no one feels pain."

He remembered feeling injured when Macie went to Kay for verification. "Dad says you go to heaven when you die. Is that true?" And while this wasn't the first time Kay had decided not to back up one of Emery's explanations for Macie, it was probably the first one that really jolted him, and the first time he became particularly unsettled because he and Kay hadn't thought to agree on how they would discuss death with Macie beforehand.

"Nobody knows what happens after we die," said Kay. "Your dad can tell you about heaven, but he doesn't know for sure." She paused, and her face went dreamy. "I think people probably turn into air, light and dancing and see-through. Dead people can float anywhere."

Kay probably had not said this solely to refute Emery's authority. She was not the type of person to tell Macie there was a heaven when she herself did not believe in one. Still, it made Emery angry, how easily she could do that.

He worried also that Macie liked Kay's explanation better. It seemed far more elegant to picture yourself as air, light and bodiless, transcending everything, becoming

part of something larger than yourself. He wondered if Macie still thought about that now, if she imagined Laurel Hines as a fragrant puff of breath floating skyward, or perhaps lingering inside her own oven, unable to get out.

At some time, surely, he and Kay had been a single and functional parental entity, but he couldn't remember those moments clearly, and now he no longer fit with her, like a machine part with its edges rusted down. He had tired of her cynicism, or her masculine candor, her sharp, dark facial features, or the way she would go for days wearing the same sweater. Maybe Emery was older now. Maybe he had become cynical himself. A woman, he thought, needed to change her goddamn sweaters. And it wasn't that she was no longer beautiful; he'd seen men's eyes on her when she moved about in the world, the way each step she took penetrated the ground like a knife, her nose a straight, sloping line, mouth small but captivating and very red. But though he could feel himself still attracted to her, they slept together hardly ever now, and he couldn't find much reason to *like* her.

He perceived Kay's influences on Macie also. If he and Macie were watching a movie, she might say, "Ugh...that's cliché," or "This main character is boring," even when Emery was invested enough in the storyline or the concept to overlook poor characterization. Macie didn't cross her legs or brush her hair as often as Amber Holliday, and Macie had also developed a habit of doodling in the margins of her notes at school.

After the filter project, the drawings increased. Macie was still at odds with Amber, which left her with no one to talk to at the back of her science class. Emery came

home from work early one day to see a cluster of worksheets spread out on the kitchen table, Macie and Kay hunched over them. The worksheets were unfinished, and there were other sheets of notebook paper covered with little creatures, fuzzy ones with antennae, skinny ones with tattoos. There were people with big hats, children in goggles, old men with beards and mustaches that stretched the length of the page.

Kay would add things. Wings. Scarves. Flowers in the hats. She and Macie laughed as they constructed these fictional things together, and when Kay looked up as Emery entered the kitchen, he felt a tremor in his chest. Kay seemed elated, her face burning, reliving an activity she had done with their daughter when Macie was six years old.

“We’re going to get these worksheets finished, right?” he asked, patting his hand on the kitchen counter. “Are they due tomorrow?”

Macie looked up. “Yeah, and I’ll get them done.” She scratched out with a pen a tall, clownish figure. “I got in trouble the other day, doodling a flower on a quiz.”

“Well, don’t doodle on your *quizzes*,” Kay said. “Be clandestine about it. Keep extra paper at the back of your notebook. I used to draw faces on the back of my hand when I was in grade school.”

“My health teacher says that drawing on your skin will give you cancer.”

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” Kay said. She looked up at Emery. “Em, tell Macie. That’s not true, is it?”

Was it an invitation? Was she welcoming him into her and Macie’s pastime? He didn’t trust it. He was worried Kay would turn on him, make him look like a fool to their

daughter, as soon as their circle closed around him. He stood in the kitchen, drumming his fingers on the counter. “Just be sure you get those worksheets finished, okay?”

“*Okay*,” Macie said, breathing out the last syllable as though someone had compressed her, and Kay took a sheet of paper, drawing one thick, hard line in black marker.

That same night, Emery began to wonder if he was not so much good at avoiding arguments as he was putting them in bottles and letting them build. The heat that he felt from Kay made him buckle, made him quietly ask her, “Do you think it’s a good idea, encouraging Macie to doodle during class?”

“Yes,” Kay said.

Emery was flossing his teeth in the bathroom. He felt bewildered, but furious, he couldn’t understand why. He peered past the door jamb and saw Kay sitting up in bed. “You really do.”

Kay grinned. “I really do.”

Emery got under the covers with her, sidling around until he was comfortable. He said, “I’m not so sure,” just before turning off the bedside lamp, so that this would denote the last lingering comment of their discrepancy, and hopefully Kay would let it rest.

They both stared into the dark, bodies parallel. “Why are you still sad about the Hines girl?” Kay asked.

Emery considered turning on the lamp again, but did not. He let the pitch black of the room eat him up.

“It was a sad thing,” he said.

“It wasn’t that sad. I think something happened.”

“No,” he said.

“I think you had an affair.”

“No. I didn’t.”

“All right, so you didn’t.”

Parallel bodies in a bed. Emery could hear Macie playing music on her stereo down the hall, even though she wasn’t supposed to. A wispy pop song. Parallel bodies cold in a bed.

“I need to tell her to turn that off,” said Emery, standing.

“Let her play it,” Kay said, but Emery had already left the bedroom. She followed him. He felt her heat on the back of his neck. “Leave it,” she said.

He waved her away. “I’m sleeping in the guest room tonight.”

“It is not a guest room,” Kay said fiercely. “It is *my* office. That’s *my* room.”

How dare she. Now they would designate themselves to specific rooms of the house, barring each other for fear of tainting their own sacred spaces? He threw open the door of the office, the guest room, whatever it was, flung his arm toward the desk, toward an uneven stack of papers there. They flew about the room as if in a windstorm, sliding, tumbling. Some of them were amateurish drawings by Macie. Kay reached out and crumpled up the front of Emery’s pajamas in her fists and pulled at him, “Fucking get out, out.” He felt himself spin about, astonished at her strength, but he steadied himself with his heels firm in the carpet, gripped both her wrists and shoved at her. When she fell, a model, an old medical model of a cross-sectioned eyeball that he still kept around,

broke underneath of her. A spear of plastic, a triangle of fractured cornea, went into her palm. She bled. Her hair hung in black strings over her face.

“Look at this,” she said. “Fuck you. *Fuck* you.”

Emery heard movement from out in the hall. He leaned back so he could see through the doorway and there was Macie’s thin shape in the darkness. Her pop music purred softly from the open door of her room. She did not ask questions but stood with resolution, wanting answers. Emery felt a pinprick in his throat, a tic in a vein on the outside of his trachea.

“Go back to bed,” he said. “Turn your music off.”

“Don’t you tell her what to do,” said his wife from the floor.

An hour or so later, Emery sat alone in the kitchen, a warm mug in his hands. There was no light on in the room aside from the red eye of the coffeemaker. He swallowed his coffee slowly to remove the queer tic in his throat, drank from a mug that he had gotten in the gift shop of the Natural History Museum.

How old was Macie when they made that museum visit? Two, maybe. She could barely speak. These were their Saturday afternoons, Emery with his young wife, walking beneath the overarching neck of a plaster-cast dinosaur skeleton. Emery and his wife and his daughter.

He remembered Macie reaching up to the distant dinosaur skull, almost brushing the skylight. Her voice echoed as she reached, “I want, I want, I want...!” Again and again, he and Kay had to pull her away from the animal’s haunches, prohibiting her from

using the vertebrae as her ladder to the top, to the deep, empty eyeholes and yellowed teeth, to the crown of the dinosaur's head. She began screaming. They fled from the museum.

Macie wailed upon their dash to the car; so mortified they were at her volume that they did not stop to coddle her. The wails continued as they strapped her into the car seat. The wails continued as Emery started the ignition.

“Jesus Christ,” said Kay. “This isn't normal. Get her to stop.”

“I'm *trying*, shut up, Kay,” he said, though he was busy driving the van out of the parking lot, onto the highway so that they could go home. Kay covered her ears and pressed her forehead to her knees, her eyes tearful. In the back, there was the little girl crying, “I want...I want...” and Emery drove on, silent.

THE SHADOW OF THE RED ROCK

I'm driving from Fort Worth to San Francisco with my boyfriend, and I've just had a clear moment. It's gone now, but I had it, something that struck from within, no warning, a flash, pure and untroubled. It made me feel as connected and awake as a live wire, as constant as the landscape, all those red rocks and mesas, but it left me as quickly as it came.

Now I'm just driving. I'm letting Jeremy sleep, his long-toed feet on the dashboard.

I've only had one other moment like this one, and that was ten years ago, when I was thirteen and into witchcraft, when Melissa Peterson and Colleen Redgrave were my best friends. That was three years after my father died and the same year I told my mother I wanted to stop going to church with her, that I no longer believed in Christianity and wanted to practice a different religion.

"And what is that?" she asked.

"Wicca," I said.

And my mother, with a taut and angry face—we were always trying to say things to hurt each other then—replied: "I think what you want, Adrian, is a religion that revolves around *you*."

Any time I hung around with Melissa and Colleen, I'd think about my mother's comment. Really, if she hadn't have said it, I might not have been into witchcraft for as

long as I was. For a year almost, I practiced rituals and spells with Melissa and Colleen to prove to myself that I was part of a group, a coven, a union of close friends who whispered secrets to one another and who loved the way friends loved in television and movies: lonely teenage girls who were lost and wandering without each other.

Of course, some secrets we never revealed. I think mine was that I never actually believed in witchcraft, but I went with Colleen and Melissa on all of our excursions in the hopes that I could believe in it, that something would happen to make me believe. Colleen claimed that she could light a candle with her mind. She had seen ghosts. In the bark of an oak tree behind her house, she'd made out a prophetic vision of the Columbine shootings and had known—had *known*—the moment she saw the news about it that this was the disaster the vision foretold, if only she had known at the time how to interpret it.

“I think what you want, Adrian, is a religion that revolves around *you*.”

This statement, it gets me angry even thinking about it now. And it may have been less infuriating if my Southern Baptist mother had been genuinely worried about my soul, which I don't think was ever the case. It was as though she thought being a witch was easy, like taking a shortcut or cheating on a test. You had to alter pretty much your entire mindset to do it, suspend a lot of disbelief. Judging from Colleen, there was a commitment that Melissa and I hadn't made yet. Colleen had stitched together many of her own clothes from velvet and faux leather. She had perfected this black-mouthed, cadaver-like look, which I envied, and which Melissa and I had tried to hopelessly mimic. We both had plump, red-cheeked faces—we could have been sisters, really—and something about the makeup looked wrong on us.

That one day I had my moment, Colleen was wearing her makeup, as she always did when we performed spells. I followed her—my friend Colleen, dark and furtive Colleen—to the rock quarry near her house. I remember staring at the back of Colleen’s head, navigating the maze of black braids, which were knitted against her scalp so tightly they pulled her skin white. I wanted Colleen’s hair. Wanted to dye it all kinds of colors. Electric blue or Easter green.

Colleen turned at the edge of the quarry and swept out her bony arms. She was shorter than Melissa and I were, but her presence was so much larger. She took up more space in a room. “You two are ready for this,” she said, then she squinted and looked up. Though the sky was overcast, it was still bright. We did not wear sunglasses. Witches do not wear sunglasses.

“Yes,” I said. “That’s why we’re here.”

Behind us, Melissa dawdled, nervous. Melissa was the girl within our group who, I’m certain, *truly* believed, who never considered once that Colleen was lying about the things she’d done. As for myself, I think I knew there was something inherently manipulative about the way Colleen ran our coven, the way she frowned when any comment was not addressed to her, the way she made suggestions as statements rather than questions: “We’ll do this ritual at my house, because there’s stronger energy there.” But Melissa did not lie or manipulate. Melissa *felt* things. Her entire young adolescence had been constructed around feeling things, and sometimes I wished I felt with the intensity that she did.

“I’m ready,” she said, her round face intense and glowing.

The quarry, a pit of deep, yellow-white limestone shelves, was a quarter-mile walk along the service road from Colleen's house, the brown-green prairie stretching out on either side of us. We passed the groves of stunted mesquite trees, the tangled wire fences, an oil derrick like a great black dinosaur, its head bobbing up and down to its own heavy tempo—*puck-puck-puck-puck*. We could still smell crude, even at the edge of the quarry.

There was a kid named Travis. He was the reason we were there that day. He practiced witchcraft also and didn't like us; Colleen said it was because we were "stronger" than he was. I had passed him in the hallway at school the day before, and he'd growled a curse and touched my hair. When I told Melissa about it over the phone that afternoon, her voice became tight. She started crying. "I could feel that something was wrong as soon as I heard you," she said. "He did something to you. I can feel it."

Whether or not Travis "did" something to me, and whether or not Melissa could "feel it" over a telephone line, Colleen said that we needed to do something to keep Travis from hurting himself or others; she was serious about this. We had to do something.

"Let's get everything out," Colleen told us.

Out on a limestone ledge, there was a charred spot where we had lit fires and performed previous spells, and we sat around it in a circle, getting out what we would need: a ceramic bowl, a bottle of water, a skein of black yarn, a seventh-grade yearbook photo of Travis as well as some things he'd left at my house, since we'd once been friends: a plastic water gun, a shoestring, the broken part of a golf club he'd used to draw obscene pictures in the dirt.

“You guys know,” Colleen said, “we could seriously fuck ourselves up doing this.”

Melissa and I nodded, our faces grave.

Out over the prairie, out beyond the overcast clouds, I saw thunderheads piling onto each other, yellow and purple and gray. Colleen took out a lighter from the same pocket where she kept her cigarettes, smiling with the corner of her dark-lipsticked mouth. We started the fire, folded up Travis’s picture and tied it with the black yarn. We burned this as well as the objects he’d left at my house. As everything shriveled in the fire pit, we held each other’s hands and said in unison, “With the thread of the crimes of your own design, we bind your evil, Travis, three times, seven times.”

The fire raised heat and the smell of burning plastic to our faces, and the wind came, a hot, dry breeze blowing in from the west, pushing out the smell of crude oil in favor of a stony, summery heat. The thorny mesquite branches whisked back and forth. Three crows burst from their perches. As my hair blew around me, I lifted my head and opened my eyes, and I saw that Melissa had done the same, both of us smiling. “We bind you from behind, we bind you from before, that you’ll hurt our people, never ever more.” A cyclone of wind blew the mesquite leaves around our circle. On the fire, the water gun melted, grotesque, and out across the prairie, the thunderclouds seemed to shred, and the sunlight broke in past them, beaconing down to us. Melissa and I laughed, and we knew each other. “We bind you from the left, we bind you from the right, we bind you by day, and we bind you by night.”

I felt as strong as I'd ever felt with these two girls. I felt the sweat of their palms on my fingers. I could smell them, Colleen and her cigarette smoke and incense, Melissa and her vanilla bath soap. I loved them then, believed that we had come together for a reason, that our meaning was grounded in our togetherness, our friendship. And I knew that we all three felt this then. We had stopped a person who meant to harm us, and the universe was offering us acknowledgement for that, echoing back in the same way Colleen's music did when she brought her boombox to this place that first time we came along with her. "You'll love this," she'd say, introducing us in succession to Rammstein, to Alanis Morissette, to The Cranberries. And we did love it, each song she played, and our shrieking voices would beat off the limestone cliffs as we sang: "*Zombay-ay-ay-ay!*" Every moment from the past six months had culminated, and it was as though we could still hear that music in our heads, even now.

Melissa and I looked at each other but Colleen still had her eyes closed, head bowed.

"We bind you from below, we bind you from above, that you may ever know the laws of life and love."

We were supposed to repeat the chant for as long as the items burned, but Colleen stopped after the first few repetitions and we had to cut ourselves short.

"We bind y—"

Melissa pressed her lips together, worried that we had messed something up. Colleen squeezed our hands and smiled to reassure us. We had all done spectacularly.

We waited around for the fire to burn out. When it did, we took the ashes and soaked them in a bowl of water. “To cleanse him,” Colleen said. She added, “So mote it be,” and had us say it too. My heart was pounding—thrill...thrill, thrill.

As I lifted my eyes up and looked out on the prairie, I wondered what I would think about this moment the next day.

Now we are about sixty miles outside of Flagstaff, I think. Jeremy moves his foot, and I worry for a moment that he’ll wake up. I feel guilty, wanting him to stay asleep, but I like the alone time. I like that the radio’s off, that we’re not playing anymore of the Dylan, Nick Drake or Neil Young that we brought on this trip. It gets old.

Jeremy reminds me of my dad sometimes, in the years before he got sick. He’s practical, an agnostic, a realist. He just got his engineering degree at Texas A&M, and he’s the one who managed to narrow down our destination to San Francisco from the more general “California,” which was my original plan. It’s killing him, taking a month of not-doing-anything to come on this trip with me, and I love that about him.

But I worry sometimes that I see my dad in Jeremy because I want to, that his complacency is actually passive aggression, and that the nap he’s taking now is really so that he doesn’t have to talk to me. Or maybe my dad had those qualities too, and I don’t remember him right. My mother, she used to get so angry with him, seemingly for no reason, and when she was angry with me, it was always because I was trying to get away with something, being just obnoxious enough to infuriate her, but not so much that I couldn’t pretend I wasn’t trying. Maybe I inherited that from my dad without knowing it.

Is it corny to say that we turned to religion after he died? Well, we did. We'd never been a religious family before, but my mother grew close with a woman in her grief support group and started taking me along with her to church. She went off to her adult Sunday school class and put me in a room with a crowd of close-knit kids I didn't know who mostly ignored me, and I'd never been very good with that kind of thing. It was hard for me to like people.

"I can't make friends with them," I told my mother. "They're all friends with each other."

"You're not trying hard enough," she said.

If I'd been able to make friends, I would have stayed a Christian for the simple fact that Christian mythology had some of the most gruesome, surreal and terrifying stories I'd ever heard. I was twelve and thrilled by fire and brimstone sermons, reading Revelations the way other kids read the *Goosebumps* series; my imagination was a cavalcade of bleeding lambs full of eyes, red-mouthed beasts lurching from the sea, satanic marks applied like stamps to the foreheads of nonbelievers. I'm amazed now that I never considered the Lake of Fire to be a physical place and that my dad was swimming in it, because if he was a Christian before he died, he certainly didn't talk much about it. This was a discussion that my mother and I never had.

It seems inevitable now that my interest in the macabre would lead me to be friends with people like Melissa and Colleen. Melissa and I met first in keyboarding class, bonded over fairies and anime. She loved everything with the frenzied enthusiasm of someone several years younger, and I liked that, because I could be like that too,

though she was sometimes naïve and bright-eyed enough to be irritating. Then Melissa starting talking to Colleen in gym class, and Colleen was the final addition to our cafeteria table, bringing along with her enough darkness and mystery to balance out the childishness that still lingered in us.

And I liked it when the coven got together. I liked the feeling of purpose we had when we left out the backdoor of Colleen's parent's house, dressed in our respective elemental colors, bright reds and yellows and greens, fire, air, and earth. We wore our pewter ankhs and pentagrams, our gemstones, sitting like embers in our jeans pockets. I liked being away from my mother and the high-ceilinged stucco house she'd recently remodeled, away from all the empty spots where my dad's things had been, and where there were now glass bowls of potpourri and *Southern Living* magazines.

All three of us, Melissa, Colleen and I, believed that we had very bad relationships with our parents. Oftentimes, we'd leave Colleen's house and her mom and dad would be getting high on the back deck in Adirondack chairs. We'd marched off across the prairie and they'd wave at us. "Just ignore them," Colleen would say.

Colleen was the kind of girl disliked by all parents except her own. To be honest, I could understand why. I had observed Melissa absorbing Colleen's every word with eager, cultish devotion, and I wondered if Colleen really was connected to supernatural forces, or if she just had a kind of charisma that made adults wary of her, charisma that I didn't have. After all, Colleen wasn't perfect. She became at best pouty and at worst vicious if anyone ever disagreed with her, and she could be very mean when she talked

about people she didn't like. "Those cunts," she'd say, the first person I had ever known to use this word without shame. "Those preppy cunts."

That day we cast the binding spell at the quarry, my mother came to pick Melissa and me up from Colleen's house, avoiding the mud puddle she'd gotten the van stuck in the last time, being cordial, though not warm, to Colleen's parents. I was still sailing on the high of my experience, reliving each second in my mind, the wind gusts, the smells, the girls' sweaty hands in mine.

"Did you have a good time?" my mother asked us, driving back into town.

"We did," I told her.

Melissa smiled and leaned her head against the window. When she spoke, it was with the airiness of a cloud-gazer, someone sighing in a deep sleep. "We love Colleen."

When she said this, it struck a sour chord in my chest. At the quarry, yes, I had loved Colleen. But here in the van with my mother was not the place for Melissa to say such things. Melissa, I wanted to say, why do you feel the need to announce your love of everybody to everybody? Though I was certain that Melissa didn't say that about everybody. I was certain she didn't say that about me, not in that way.

My mother looked at Melissa in the rearview mirror. "Yes," she said. "Colleen is a very unique girl."

When Melissa went home and it was just me again, closed up in my bedroom by myself, I thought about what had happened that day, how I had felt holding hands with those two girls. I thought about what Melissa had said—*we love Colleen*—but I didn't think I loved Colleen, not in the rapturous way that Melissa loved her, and did Colleen

deserved that kind of rapturous love? Did I? Should I feel ashamed for wondering? I thought about how the spell at the quarry had eradicated my doubts, but how quickly those doubts had reappeared once I was alone. I thought about calling Melissa to talk to her and confirm what we had seen and felt, but I was annoyed with her for having said that to my mother—*we love Colleen*—as though anybody would love Colleen if they were to meet her. Obviously, this wasn't true. My mother didn't like Colleen and she didn't have to say anything for me to know that. Though sometimes I got the feeling that my mother didn't even like me, that what she wanted most was to be alone in the house, which was a very beautiful house, but which was filled with so many holes, holes so deep and big you could step into them, like passages in a maze. I was sure that people who didn't know us could walk into the foyer and feel those empty spaces just as I did.

I thought about Travis too that night, wondering if he'd felt our spell, if he had flopped to the floor of his house, which was just two blocks from mine, convulsing in resistance. The girls both knew that Travis and I had been friends, that we'd known each other before Melissa and exchanged notes in keyboarding class, before we started comparing the shapes of our palms with Colleen in the cafeteria, before middle school entirely and before I watched my dad wither up and blow away like a strip of paper. Though Travis was inexplicably mean to me, the ways boys are (I now know) when they like you, it was he who'd introduced me to witchcraft in the first place. The summer before I even met Melissa and Colleen, he'd laid me down in the grass in my backyard and held my hand. "I got this spell from the Internet," he said. "You do this right, you'll go into a

trance and see all your past lives and shit.” And he gripped my hand tight, counting, “Ten, nine, eight...” with me breathing, “seven, six, five...” eyes closed.

Am I lost?

I won't wake him up to ask his opinion. I've never driven this far before. I've never spent this much time with another person alone. It's why I felt the need to do this with him, if our relationship is going to work. And if we are lost, I would like to believe it's for a reason, and not simply because I took a wrong exit somewhere. But there is nothing here. The desert is pitch black, too dark to see beyond the road, even if there was something to look at.

I come down from clear moments pretty hard, I've found.

I come down from them to the point where I don't want to feel those doubts alone, because it's painful to doubt alone. I want to drag others into the bog with me, and I'm trying not to do that with Jeremy. I'm really trying, because I know he cares about me. But it takes a lot of strength.

That day after the quarry, Melissa just wouldn't shut up about the spell. Literally, it was the only thing she talked about any time she opened her mouth, and she was still talking about it when we met at the lockers after second period. “I feel safer now,” she kept saying. “This space just feels safer.” And the blissful way she said it make me want to shatter her conviction. Why should she be so content when I was floundering? I slammed my locker shut, hard enough say that I was angry, but Melissa, in her haze of faith and love for Colleen, didn't notice.

“Do you really think Travis would have done something?” I asked. “I mean, he’s kind of an idiot.”

“That’s what makes him so dangerous,” Melissa said. “What we did at the quarry made everything right. Don’t you feel it?”

I could have said that I did feel it. I could have kept my doubts to myself, as I usually did where Melissa was concerned. There was no way to disprove that the spell had worked after all. Travis was going about his own business in his own group of friends, and nobody was going to go up to him to ask if he felt any more *bound* today than he did yesterday.

“You’re always feeling something,” I said. “You know all this Wicca stuff is a game.”

Melissa looked at me, wounded. “But, if you’ve got doubts, you could endanger all of us.”

She said this with uncertainty, so careful that the words “all of us” inflected upward like a balloon she had released. Melissa would not challenge me by herself, but I should have known that she would report my skepticism to Colleen, and that Colleen would confront me at lunch that day, and that she wouldn’t stand to not be taken seriously.

“Adrian,” she said, her eyes dark and hooded in a way I’d only seen when she talked about the people she hated, “if you’ve got doubts, you could endanger all of us.”

Melissa sat next to Colleen at the other side of the cafeteria table, nodding and looking somber. I was afraid of Colleen, whose black eyeliner made her look much older than I did, but Melissa I wanted to punch in the face.

“Did you think it was a game, what we did yesterday?” Colleen asked.

“No,” I said.

“But you said that. You fucking said that to Melissa.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. Melissa didn’t hear me right.”

I looked at Melissa, but she had her bottom jaw sticking out, her dopey blue eyes big, bigger than I’d ever seen them. “No, I heard you right,” she whispered. “I heard you right.”

“If you didn’t say it was a game, what exactly did you say?” Colleen asked, folding her arms in front of her.

I could think of no way to defend myself, cut out from the circle and ganged up on. I’d been cast down the side of a precipice, cast into the quarry like the refrains of the songs we loved.

“I don’t have time for this,” I said, taking my tray. I found an empty cafeteria table to finish lunch by myself, though from where I sat I could see them, Colleen patting Melissa’s hair, consoling her, Melissa looking broken and bewildered, as though someone had died. I saw them later behind the art building, sharing the clove cigarettes that Colleen kept her in her back pocket, laughing about a joke I couldn’t hear.

*

We're four days into the trip. No computers. No cell phones. Only our clothes and camera, the road trip CDs, the life changing authors—Tolstoy, Kerouac, Bukowski—we claimed we would read but haven't touched yet. We were just recently fighting about the way I drive because I accelerate fast, jerking Jeremy's little Honda into submission. He's a casual driver. I can't stand it. After we fought, he put his sunglasses over his eyes and began his long, fake nap. I pulled into a rusty gas station to fill up.

As things have been going, Jeremy and I switch off driving whenever we stop, but I didn't want to talk to him then with his spider legs bent awkwardly on the dashboard, head back and mouth open. I left him alone and pumped gas, the horizon around me so low and flat that a trio of payphones eclipsed the sun as it sank, casting a long, bruise-colored shadow across the asphalt. I fingered some quarters in my pocket and decided to call my mother.

She's not on board with the trip. She's lonely and she misses me. She says, "All this nonsense about finding yourself. You *make* yourself."

I told her, "I think things will make sense when Jeremy and I get to California."

When I called, I picked up the usual answering machine, a message that features my mother's voice getting coy and playful toward the end: "And if this is Adrian, please give me a way to contact you. I just want to know where the little vagabond is." I laughed when I heard it the first time, but I still can't imagine what people calling the house might think, that I'm a criminal of some sort, running from the law.

“Mom, we’ll stop in Flagstaff,” I said. “We’ll call you at the motel.” I paused. “Things are going good. There’s a lot to look at out here. There’s a lot to think about.” There is always a lot to think about.

It happened as I walked back to the car, pushing my way through the heat of early evening, the smell of tar and gasoline, the terrain around me all in purple and red and orange. A butte stood like a behemoth monster in the distance, and the sun slipped behind it, stretching out its shape on the desert before me. It chilled me to feel the shadow on my skin, struck so deep it made my bones tremble, and I remembered Jeremy telling me how cold the desert gets at night, the trips he’d taken with his father, kayaking on the Colorado, evening bonfires, nylon sleeping bags. How awful it would be to bed down by yourself in this place. To not feel the warmth of another human being’s body near you. To have to listen to the insects and the animals creeping about beyond the circle of your firelight, sliding their way past the crackling leaves of the yucca plants, the dried vines breaking underfoot. And you can’t tell whether these creatures want to harm you, or if they are afraid of you, and you have no way of knowing.

I saw Jeremy though the back window of the Honda, reclined, pretending to sleep. And I knew what it was I’ve wanted to tell him since the trip started, the statement that will make it all fit together for us. For a clear moment, all my thoughts were doubtless, and I knew what would happen when I explained sufficiently how I needed him, when I said what needed to be said. Jeremy, even though we are not perfect, we can do good for ourselves together. Of course, this has been the answer the whole time and what a fool I was not to see it sooner.

“Jeremy, wake up!” I said, tapping on the window, but Jeremy turned his head to one side and groaned at me. And as soon as he did this, the feeling was gone, something so small and intricate that trying to fit another person inside of it made it erupt, all at once, like a murder of crows taking off from a power line, and I was left by myself again in the desert, just me alone.

“What?” Jeremy said, looking up at me through the window. When I didn’t answer, he said it again, getting irritated with me. “What?”

Not for the first time, I looked over my shoulder at the landscape and wondered what I was doing here.

THIRTY THOUSAND MILES ABOVE

They had always thought, though they'd never said it aloud to one another, that their father would die soon after they left that house. Neither sister could understand precisely why she thought this, since there was nothing wrong with him when they left, though he was old, much older, it had always seemed, than other fathers. When their brother came back to the States, he helped them hire someone to cook and to keep the house tidy, but the sisters—Barbara, who'd married not two years after moving out, and Sera, who for a time traveled in Cambodia with a crew of college graduates—had found it easier, perhaps more pleasing, to imagine their father, ancient like the old colonial house in which he lived, vanishing in a flash, rather than withering the way other old men withered.

It was nineteen years since they'd moved out and left the city, and now it was his seventy-fifth birthday, and Sera was inside the house, running her fingers along the molding in the hallway the way she'd done as a child, a dust rag limp in her hand, and Barbara was outside the house, struggling to parallel park on Beaufain Street, bags of party supplies toppling and emptying themselves in the seat next to her.

Barbara had purchased, most spectacularly, a string of pink Japanese lanterns, each one as large as her head. As she pulled them from the car, the wind picked up, teasing gusts, remnants of yesterday's tropical storm. She was a sight. The weightless lanterns whipped around and socked her in the chin, hard enough to make her flinch and

stumble against the car door. It didn't hurt. Not really. But she looked around in hopes that no one had seen her reaction.

The street was gray and wet and mostly empty except for three black boys with bicycles standing across the way. They were skinny and ill-dressed, the kind of boys who made roses from palmetto fronds, sold them for a dollar a piece around Market and Meeting. They were staring at Barbara.

She smiled at them. Straightened her posture. Said, "Hello." On her way up the curb, she stumbled—the sidewalks were earthquake-broken, good for tripping, for making a fool of yourself. One of the boys, she heard him laugh to his friends, and she pulled her coat collar up high around her face. When she looked over her shoulder, the boys were disappearing down the rain-flooded street, two pedaling away on their bicycles, one riding on the other's handlebars. It made Barbara feel like crying, knowing she had been laughed at. Not that she would cry. Just that she could, if she'd allowed herself to.

She took a moment to smooth out the knot in her throat, standing on the front porch. Their father's house had a vast, wrap-around porch, a yard flanked with live oaks and jasmine hedges. Inside was a compressed edifice of narrow rooms, painted and repainted, scuffed hardwood floors and damp rugs. A red-carpeted stairway with a curled banister. An ant problem. Pervasive smells—paint, mold, and age—that had saturated the walls. And Sera was in there now, wandering through the rooms as though she had never been in the house before, though they'd lived there well into their twenties while their brother was overseas.

Barbara hoped that Sera would have the roast in the oven by now, a beautiful roast with a coffee rub, which Barbara had bought from the Harris Teeter. They remembered between them that the coffee rub was one of few things their father had ever adamantly professed to liking. This along with bourbon, and the way Alan had looked in his Air Force uniform, and the air shows on base. “Your mother would never go to the air shows with me,” he said to them once, one of the few times he mentioned her. This was the mother whom Barbara was named after, and who left the country when Barbara was three and when Sera was two.

Arguably, his dementia set in over the course of the previous year, culminating on the day when the housekeeper came in to work that morning and couldn’t find their father anywhere, and then later saw him walking up and down the sidewalk in his pajamas. He was looking for someone, but he couldn’t remember who, and when she approached him, he thought that she was woman who had worked at his office twenty years ago, and he accused her of lying when she explained to him that she was the housekeeper. She had known him as a man to entertain no visitors, to go without changing his clothes for days and days, to set out his belongings in boxes in the middle of the floor, to arrange them and rearranged them, and she had reported these oddities to the sisters and to Alan, and they kept them offhandedly in mind. Even so, to Barbara and Sera this event— when he went out of his head for a time, when he wandered the sidewalks in his pajamas—felt like a time bomb that had gone off.

And could it have been there before, long before—the hidden seed behind any moment they could remember when his behavior toward them was socially tactless, aloof, or angry without reason? It seemed that it had always been this way, even when he was still working—he'd quit his job at the SCE&G power company three years before they moved out—and had something productive on which to focus his energy, something other than his books and magazines, his World War II model aircraft. In one of their trips they took back to Charleston together, because they always came together, the sisters ended up in a cold and sharp-edged doctor's office, slick-haired Alan jouncing his leg on his knee and glancing out the window as though he really did not want to be there with them. They all three listening to a condescending, mustached man from Connecticut tell them that dementia was a “sneaky” disease, and that it had probably been resting in their father's mind for years.

Driving back up to Charlotte in Barbara's Ford Taurus, to the neighborhood where they lived not two blocks from each other, Barbara said aloud: “It's true that he was always getting our names confused.”

Sera nodded, turning the air conditioner onto her neck. Ever since traveling abroad, she always became hot in enclosed spaces. “That's true. He was.”

“I mean, I keep thinking of all those times he called us ‘the girls.’ Even when it was just one of us, he would call us ‘the girls.’ You would go over to a friend's house for dinner and it would still be, ‘Alan, pass the brisket to the girls.’ He would correct himself, but the fact that he said it, still...”

“You need to fix one of your briskets, Barb,” Sera said, her voice drifting off.

“You haven’t done that in a while.”

Barbara ignored the comment about the briskets, as Sera was trying to change the subject. “The nurse that Alan found for him, she’s such an unlikable person,” she said. “I wish it was someone who didn’t boss him around like a little boy. I’m sure he hates it.”

Sera thought about this, and now both of them were thinking about how much they disliked Beth, a creature so aggressively sunny-sweet she was unbearable. She was Alan’s replacement for the housekeeper—who had in turn replaced Sera and Barbara—the woman now responsible for setting their father’s daily schedules and making sure that he didn’t sustain himself solely on frozen steaks and cheese. Whenever the sisters came home, Beth would crouch to their father’s level (he was always sitting in the den with the television on), open her mouth in a big dark “O,” and exclaim, “Look who’s here!”

“Yes,” Sera said. “Beth is unlikable. Though he didn’t say anything about hating her, so maybe she’s all right when we aren’t there.”

Barbara tapped the side of the steering wheel, still dwelling on her dislike for Beth. “Well, I don’t know. It’s all working out, I guess.”

Beth had taken the day off for their father’s seventy-fifth birthday party, and both sisters were pleased to see her leave that morning. Still, they were nervous. This was the first time they had been in the house alone with their father for a number of years, and they would continue to be alone with him, getting everything ready for the dinner that night, until Alan and his wife drove in from Summerville at six o’clock “On the dot,”

Alan had said. Though, “On the dot,” to Alan often meant something different than what Barbara and Sera would have liked it to mean.

Sera felt resigned toward this. This was merely how Alan was. And she could control her anxieties knowing her brother’s habits. She stayed upstairs and cleaned, her father in his easy chair in the den gazing at the snowy television with a focus atypical of those whose minds were going. The house felt like a tomb, filled with cracks and holes that could not be filled again. Holes that Sera tried to ignore as she looked for the vacuum cleaner, because Beth had moved it somewhere.

As she was searching the linen closet, she found, behind a pile of old washcloths, a blue, beaded necklace wrapped in cotton. Sera felt stunned by the tenderness of the object, something she would not have expected to find in their father’s house: small, secret, and female. Their father had never appreciated those sorts of things. They’d always known this.

Once, in their late teens, Barbara and Sera found a lamp at a flea market, encrusted in shells and resin mermaids, and while anyone would understand the lamp to be cheap and kitschy, they both agreed, somehow, that it reminded them of the pictures from stories they’d read as children, those whimsical girl’s bedrooms in pastel colors. They decided the lamp would be inconspicuous in the back bedroom, so they brought it home, though the next day, they looked out their window and saw it on the curb by the garbage bin, and Barbara, who had loved the lamp the most, cried.

Barbara would have told Sera that she'd forgotten all about the lamp, though she hadn't, not really. She was now pushing her way through the front door, paper lanterns in tow and found their father still in his easy chair, which was where he'd been all morning.

"Fiddle the antenna for me," he said, pointing toward the television. "Fiddle the antenna, Beth. It's all fuzzy."

Barbara looked at him, sinking into his chair. Their father had always seemed so big to them, stout and sturdy, though he'd never been a tall man. Now he was sinking into the cushions, a veritable bag of bones. "Daddy," Barbara said, maneuvering the antenna as he asked. The picture jolted, then cleared. "I'm Barbara, not Beth. And I'm glad about that, too."

"I know who you are," he said. "Stop there. Stop!" Barbara stopped. "The picture's good," he said. "I'd get up, but the girls turned the heater off this morning. The floor's like a goddamn ice rink."

Barbara would have suggested that their father put his slippers on, since it was seventy degrees outside, but she didn't want to upset him. She stood on her toes and looked around. Her heart sank when she stretched her neck toward kitchen and saw the roast sitting uncooked on the countertop.

"This is never going to get off the ground, is it," she said to herself.

"What's not?" their father said.

"I'm talking to myself," she said. "I'm talking about your party."

Their father bunched his shoulders up to his ears, an exaggerated shrug, then turned back to the television, where Carol Burnett came onto the set wearing a curtain rod on her shoulders.

In the kitchen, Barbara set the oven to preheat, angry that no one had done this already. And the ants! The ant buttons they'd put out obviously weren't worth a damn. Six of them, little black ants, had found the roast and were crawling on it, and Barbara flicked them off into the sink. She went to find Sera upstairs.

She was in the guest bedroom, unresponsive to anger, standing in front of the full-body mirror with a smile on her face and looking much like a little girl. Sera was younger than Barbara, though not by much. They were Irish twins, barely ten months apart. At the moment they were both forty-three, though in another two months they would be different ages.

"What are you doing?" Barbara asked. "I asked you to put the roast in this morning. It was out on the counter. You left it on the counter for the ants to get it. They were crawling on it."

Sera looked up, eyebrows arched. "I forgot about it," she said. "I'm sorry. I haven't been downstairs yet. Barb, look here." She touched her throat, and Barbara noticed the necklace but was too irritated to say that it looked nice. Each bead held a blue symbol, an Asian character, which resembled a pound sign from afar.

"Where did you get that?" she asked.

"I found it tucked away in the linen closet. Is it yours?"

"No." Barbara pressed her lips together. "Maybe it's Beth's."

“Beth wears denim jumpers with pantyhose.”

Barbara tapped the side of her face, knowing that this was true. “Maybe it’s Diane’s. She and Alan were here last week.”

But the secretive way that the necklace had been stashed made both women wonder if it had belonged to their mother. Barbara wanted to see how those beads looked on her neck as well, but she didn’t think they had time for this, and she didn’t want to become attached to the necklace if it happened to belong to Diane, as Diane was particular about her things.

“I should have bought some jewelry in Cambodia while I was there,” Sera said. “You could get it so cheap.”

“Is this what you’re going to do all day?” Barbara asked. “We can get down some of his old hunting hats from the attic, see how you look in those.”

“Don’t be mean,” Sera said.

“Come on, Ser,” Barbara said. “What do you want to do?”

“What do *I* want to do?” Sera asked.

“I’m asking you now, after lunch, do you want to decorate, or do you want to go down to Saffron and get the cake. I want to know what it is you’d rather do.”

Sera wanted to go and get the cake, but she knew that Barbara would prefer to do this. It was Barbara who had ordered the cake. Barbara who knew what it was she wanted the cake to look like. “I’ll decorate, I guess,” she said. “Did you find some nice things?”

“Let me show you,” Barbara said. “Come downstairs and see.”

Sera, still wearing the necklace, followed Barbara back to the foyer, where the shopping bags of party supplies sat, shimmering and ribbon-wrapped, and the pink paper lanterns hung on a hook by the hall mirror.

Sera nodded. "I like them."

"I was thinking of hanging them around the dining room," Barbara said. "With the bulbs lit in them, they'll really be beautiful. What do you think about that?"

Sera squinted and chewed on a cuticle. "I think it'd be good."

Barbara eyed Sera's face, but her sister's gaze had wandered off toward the living room, where their father had fallen asleep in his chair, arms over his chest like a mummy. It was impossible for Barbara to ask Sera to be more enthusiastic, as Sera would say, "I am enthusiastic. I wouldn't have come with you if I didn't want to do this for him." The truth was that neither of them could bear the thought of, firstly, visiting to their father's house alone, or, secondly, knowing that the other was visiting alone.

From the kitchen, the oven signaled its preheated alarm. Sera put the roast in.

The afternoon rolled around, and as Barbara was gathering up her purse, armoring herself to go and pick up the cake, something caught her eye out the window. The smell of the roast had permeated the walls of the house, replacing the must and the moldiness with a sweet, meaty scent. The scent made them hungry, but not hungry enough to stop and eat something. They had given their father his ham sandwich-and-iced tea lunch, but they'd snacked all morning off of cashew nuts and cheese cubes, neither of them sitting down for anything.

Outside, the palmetto rose boys were back, throwing buckeyes across the street as far as they could, clearing the iron fence guarding their father's front yard. "Is this some kind of assault?" she asked herself aloud.

Sera walked over and looked out the window with her, the clean, lemony smell of furniture polish rising up from her skin. She had been spraying down the dining room table with a citrusy mist. "What is it?"

"Those boys," Barbara said, "were laughing at me earlier."

"Why?"

"Because I'm ridiculous. I looked ridiculous carrying those lanterns inside."

Sera opened the door. One of the boys' buckeyes sailed across the street and struck the walkway, bounced, and rolled up very near their front porch. "Hey," Sera shouted. "Hey, will you kids find something else to do, please?"

The boys looked at Sera, smiling open-mouthed, eyes as Barbara remembered them from that morning—the you-are-ridiculous stare. The you-have-no-authority stare. But they didn't backtalk Sera and they didn't stay behind, riding off on their bicycles in a different direction than where Barbara had seen them go previously.

"I don't think they were assaulting the house," Sera said. "They're just kids."

"I know they are," Barbara said.

Sera stood against the edge of the door and let her small body swing back and forth with it. "Barbara," Sera said. "This is a family affair. You do know that it will just be the five of us."

“Yes.” Barbara buttoned up her khaki pea coat. “But five people, fifty people, it doesn’t matter. It should be nice. We should make sure that everyone has a nice time. That’s our job.” After a moment, she added, “I’m making it our job,” and squeezed Sera’s hand as she left. “Thank you for helping, hon. I won’t be long. Twenty minutes at the most.”

Now Barbara was gone from the house again. Now Sera felt the weight of discomfort. She was nervous, moving in and out of the living room where their father sat. She didn’t like being in the house alone, but she liked decorating. She liked making rooms pleasant and presentable. If she focused on this she would be all right.

Some time before lunch, she and Barbara had laughed to one another when the phone rang. “It’s Alan, calling to say he’s going to be late. Or calling to say he’s not coming.” But to say such words aloud and then to laugh at them cast a shadow over their jokes. As it turned out, the call was from Barbara’s husband, Jack, asking how things were going and again expressing regret about having a medical conference that weekend and being unable to drive down with them. In the background: the joyful clink of silverware, the palaver of restaurant patrons.

“The men have fed us to the wolves,” Sera teased when Barbara hung up.

But her sister’s voice was sharp and impatient when she replied, “He had a conference. He did not abandon me.” And Sera had not known how to respond.

Now, she continued to dust, polishing the kitchen cabinets, the legs of the tables and chairs. She made her way into the den, cleaned the television, and wiped the mirror

above the mantelpiece until she felt the burn in her arm muscles and a sweat came out on her brow.

“Someone’s cooking something,” their father said. Sera turned around and saw him sitting up in his easy chair, sniffing the air.

“It’s that roast you like,” Sera said. “Smells good, eh?”

“It’s a strange smell,” he said. “I don’t remember ever saying I liked roasts. Most of those loaf meats, they get too dry.”

“Well,” Sera said, not wanting to give in to him. “You’ll like it when you eat it.”

“What is that you’re wearing around your neck, girl?” he asked.

Sera hadn’t forgotten that the necklace was there, but she still put her hand on her throat. “We found it upstairs. We think it might be Diane’s. I’m just holding onto it.”

“Diane,” he said, as though testing her name on his tongue. “Diane is a sweet girl. A good girl. Alan is lucky.” He rested his chin in his hand, and his eyes cleared. His face became soft, dreamy even. “I bought my wife a necklace, a lot like that one, while I was in Korea. I mailed it to her in a cracker tin. She wrote me back, said the clasp had broken.”

Sera felt something electric in her veins. Her cheeks blushed with heat. He was silent now, and she wanted to ask, “What else can you tell me about that?” but she was afraid that she would irritate him in the way she had always irritated him with her curiosity. Her questions. If she did that, the spell cast in this moment would be gone. He would be as usual.

“Seemed as though the clasps were always broken,” he said. “Nothing ever right.”

“It feels like that sometimes,” she said, in the meek voice she hated.

He looked at her, coming back from his distant place, and his face went sharp again. “What have you done to know something about that?”

“I went to Cambodia,” Sera said.

“That *red* country?”

“Cambodia isn’t communist.” She’d had this discussion with him a number of times before. “You’re thinking of Vietnam.”

“They’re all the same,” he said.

“No, they aren’t. Cambodia is a kingdom.” She knew it wouldn’t matter to tell him this. As far as he was concerned, the United States stood alone above an endless sea of red, as all the rest of the world had fallen.

The discussion of Southeast Asian countries had him agitated now, and Sera felt relieved to hear the phone ring so that she could retreat into the kitchen to answer it. She expected it to be Jack, giving her some message he’d forgotten to tell Barbara. But this time it was Alan, saying that he might be late, and that they might have to start dinner without him. “I will try, try, try my damndest to be on time,” he said. “But Diane’s having these stomach cramps. If they get worse, I’m taking her to prenatal, just to be on the safe side.”

Though Alan had a reason for potentially being late, the reason itself did not matter, as it would have been something. Anything. Sera was sure that Alan searched for reasons and that, every time, he artfully and inevitably found them.

*

It was just the five of them, so it wasn't really a party. But Barbara explained it to Sera, and Sera had *agreed*: they had to do this for their father. A year into his disease, he would need them now more than ever. "It can't be any more difficult than going to Asia and back," Barbara had said, though with an edge of jealousy that both sisters recognized. Both sisters also knew that Sera would rather go back to Cambodia.

When they first left their father's house, Barbara quit her job as a secretary at the power company and went to work a similar job in Charlotte; Sera came with her, taking night classes at Queens University. When Barbara married Jack, Sera met someone also, became close with his group of friends, and went with them on their trip to Phnom Penh for an indeterminate length of time.

For weeks, Barbara had felt limbless, immobilized, picturing Sera cutting through jungle trails with a machete, far away on the other side of the globe, mosquito-exposed and sunburned. Sera sent long letters, but never stayed in a place more than a few days. When Sera's beau finally did rent an apartment in Siem Reap (Barbara couldn't begin to pronounce this, not even in her mind) long enough for her to send a letter herself, she felt embarrassed to write it. Sera was jubilant and articulate; Barbara slogged through sentences like a lost hiker through mud. "Things going OK here. Jack chained to the medical practice as always, working long nights. Don't get bit by any poisonous snakes over there. Miss you, love!"

Sera came back to Charlotte three weeks after Barbara wrote this letter, tanned, thin and smelling strange. She read her sister's words as a distress call, believed that Barbara was deprived in the life she had chosen. Barbara, who had never privileged herself

to observe the curvature of the earth from the window of a transatlantic flight, miles and miles up, so far that the plane could not be seen from the ocean below it. She needed Sera there to alleviate her loneliness. Sera wanted to tell her the things she had missed, but Barbara listened only in the most polite way to Sera's accounts of foreign adventures, nodding, rarely asking questions that required long answers, and this angered Sera, though she never knew how to express it. After Cambodia, she had a series of beaus. They all failed to keep her interest, and she got pregnant only once by accident, miscarrying before she knew about it. She didn't tell Barbara.

Barbara had her own uterine problems, which she discussed with Sera, though with indifference, trying to demonstrate that she was moving on from these things. For years, she'd been unable to conceive at all despite trying, and Jack, though she loved him with the kind of abandon men rarely reciprocated, was ambivalent about exploring options on the matters of children.

Those things aside, Barbara worried that Sera had problems connecting with people. She'd seen pictures from Cambodia, and one in particular touched her. It was tank-topped Sera and her "fella," a handsome though dirty-looking man, with three other young people, standing in front of some temple—Sera told her the name of the temple, but Barbara couldn't remember—and it was clear from the photograph that Sera was the quiet one of this group, nestled in the social fringes and grimacing under the weight of her boyfriend's arm. She'd flown home by herself, not with the rest of them, leaving her beau with the apartment in Siem Reap. When Barbara hugged her sister's head at the air-

port, Sera's hair unwashed, smelling of grease and lemongrass and other foreign scents, she caught loneliness too, an unbearable pain of separation.

Nowadays, Sera, of course, lived in the same neighborhood as Barbara. She had a job at a magazine somewhere downtown, and from what Barbara could gather, though Sera didn't talk about such things, the job paid good money, enough for Sera to live comfortably by herself.

Outside the bakery, Barbara almost stumbled on the sidewalk. The storm had left palmetto fronds scattered everywhere, along with the tree's little black seeds, as treacherous as spilled marbles. The man at the register saw through the window as Barbara threw out her hands for balance, and he smiled, and only after she had collected herself did she go inside.

"I'm here for pick up," she said.

"Your name, lovely," the register man said, and he winked at her. "You look windblown."

Barbara felt her blood go to her face when she realized that the man was flirting with her, a situation that she'd never in her life been able to handle to her satisfaction. It took someone like Jack, her husband, to even assure her that she was attractive, that other men weren't humoring her out of boredom, or teasing her to be mean.

The register man himself wasn't bad-looking, a little chubby around his jaws, but with a kind face, flour dusting his stubbled chin and throat.

"Barbara Lanning," she told him.

“Uno momento,” he said, holding up a finger before he disappeared into the back.

The bakery was empty aside from a young couple, college kids, at a half-hidden booth, and Barbara searched wildly for some shiny surface so that she could check her appearance. On the side of a silver napkin holder, she saw herself. She looked as though someone had thrashed her; her mascara had made little half-moon bruises underneath her eyes, her lipstick smeared. But she didn’t try to fix it. She almost liked it—a toughened look.

She felt an intricate love for makeup. Their father had had complained about its smell and how it looked on other women, and the sisters had always been nervous of the cold way he eyed at them when they wore it. “He wanted us to be boys,” Sera said once, but Barbara didn’t think that was the issue, since their father had never encouraged them to be masculine. He had never encouraged them to do anything, really.

Both of them resembled their mother, though neither sister had known that before they were both well into their teens. They had found the photographs their father kept in the crawlspace upstairs, a woman sitting on the back porch, her eyes focused above the camera, mouth smiling but closed. She wore a loose-fitting dress with sandals, wooden beads around her neck, but her face, it looked angry, and both sisters saw this but neither could pinpoint why.

“I like how she dresses,” Sera had said. “I like her look.” And when they moved out of the house Sera had tried to emulate their mother’s look, and still did.

“Barbara Lanning,” the register man said, coming back with a white box, Barbara’s name written on the side in marker.

“Yes,” Barbara said. She opened the box to check it. It was simpler than she expected it to be, white icing with the words in blue: HAPPY 75TH BIRTHDAY! “It’s perfect, thank you,” she said, but she felt again that she might cry, even though there would be no reason for it. Nothing was going wrong, and yet something snuck around in the back of her mind, something vicious, and she couldn’t understand what it was.

“Hey,” the register man said. “Are you all right, ma’am?”

“Fine,” Barbara said, but she felt ill about the way he had asked her this question. It made her think of the nights she had spent in her husband’s arms, his sleeping breath on the back of her neck and her body stiff, wide awake. She would whisper into the darkness of the bedroom, a mantra, as her psychiatrist had suggested, “You are so kind to me, and I deserve kindness,” but she was ashamed at her own need for reassurance.

Back at the house, their father was crouched in the middle of the living room, going through a box of index cards. Recipes, perhaps a hundred of them that Barbara and Sera between them had collected, all in a pile on the hardwood floor. Barbara clutched the corners of the cake box and held it tight to her chest. “Daddy, what are you doing?”

“Why do you keep these?” he said. “None of these were any good. Why the hell are you hanging onto them?”

“*Why?*” Barbara said. “They’re in your house. Dad, we haven’t lived here for years.”

He looked up at Barbara and his eyes were mean. It was not unusual for him to be mean. At the power company where he worked, they’d called him a vindictive son of a

bitch, and even Alan, who had carried around their father's Close Combat Badge like a talisman all through high school, had admitted, "He's not what you'd call a people person. He never will be."

Now, he stared Barbara down. "I've been to Alan's house," he said. "He doesn't keep a bunch of shit lying around, not like here. Beth, is Alan here yet?"

"I'm not Beth. Dad, look at me. I am not Beth."

He shook his head and went back to the cards. "Just get rid of these," he said.

Barbara set the cake on an end table and stepped toward him, reaching down to help him stack the index cards and put them back in the box. He threw out his arm, like a snake striking. Barbara laughed as a reflex, but the sound felt like sand in her mouth, and her body was paralyzed, unable to take any action or say anything.

Sera appeared in the kitchen doorway, a dishtowel over her shoulder. "Alan and his wife are going to be late," she said. "He's called me twice now. We going to have to go ahead and eat without him."

"How late will he be?" Barbara said. "We can wait."

But Sera told her the situation, about how Diane's damn stomach cramps had started that morning and had worsened, how they were worried there was something wrong with the baby, etcetera. Alan was so nervous about everything; he had to get the green light from a professional.

Barbara rubbed her forehead with her hands. "I really—I don't really think I want to start any of this without him here."

“Alan said he needs to eat on time.” Sera said, pointing to their father. “So that he can take his meds. But—there’s a problem with that.”

“What problem?”

Sera looked behind her, as though surveying wreckage. “He took it out.”

“The roast?”

Sera nodded.

The roast lay in the kitchen sink, a cluster of ants sniffing around it. Barbara had never in her life thought that food could die, but the roast was dead. A dead thing, dumped on its side in a stainless steel basin. “We’ll put it back in,” she said. “We’ll just put it back in. It’ll cook a while and it’ll be fine. We’ll resurrect it.” The roast was still very hot when she took it from the sink and put it back in its pan, hot enough to make her wince and jerk her arms back. “He didn’t burn himself, did he?” she asked.

“No,” Sera said. “He had the wherewithal to use a mitt.”

“He has the wherewithal to use a mitt, but half the time he doesn’t remember our names. God *damn* these ants!” Barbara shoved the roast back into the oven. There was something white on the edge of it, soap residue maybe. She closed the oven door with her foot. “If we cook a few of those insect bastards along with it, that’s fine. This roast *will* get cooked.”

Sera put a fingernail in her mouth and chewed it. “That’s really gross,” she said.

“Have you been working on the dining room?” Barbara asked.

“Kind of,” Sera said. “I started putting the lanterns up, but I wasn’t sure how you wanted it done, so I thought maybe it’d be best if you did it.”

“Sera, did you do *anything*?”

Sera glared at Barbara, and she took her sister by the arm, leading her into the living room to show that she had arranged a bouquet of lilies, bruised from the wind and rain the day before. She had laid out the table with a lace tablecloth, and she had folded the burgundy napkins and placed them in their golden rings, and she had dusted the chandelier, which was impressive, because Barbara would not have remembered to do it. But the paper lanterns lay tangled in the corner.

“All right, well, I’ll get you started,” Barbara said. “I’ll show you how I think they should go.”

Sera stood with her arms folded while Barbara got a hammer and some nails, and she eyed the length of the cord and placed the nail a few inches above her head. “About here? Yeah.” She put the nail through the dry wall, and it sank in with a light tap.

“You can’t do it like that,” Sera said.

Barbara looked over her shoulder. “Why not?”

“Those nails are going to slide right out. You need to hammer them into the beams.”

Barbara narrowed her eyes and, though she tried hard not to make an ugly face, felt her lip curl. “They’re not going to slide out. These lanterns aren’t that heavy.”

“No. You watch me.” Sera reached up and pulled out the nail that Barbara had just tapped in, as easily as if taking it from Styrofoam. “You need to find a beam.”

Barbara turned her back to Sera and tapped in the next nail. “How about I just do this.”

“You’re doing it wrong. You’re going to be disappointed.”

“Then I’ll be disappointed.”

Sera reached out and snatched the hammer and nail from Barbara, her arms strong for their size, taut and tanned. She shouldered Barbara aside and set the nail and slammed the hammer down, missing, grazing her thumb. She cried out and swore and struck wildly at nothing, and when she did, the hammer pierced the drywall, making a neat, tear-shaped hole and blowing up a whitish dust. From that hole came a black wave, ants, a nest, spilling out like smoke, the tiny creatures tumbling over one another with white larvae in their jaws, cascading down the wallpaper. Sera began to scream and Barbara, hearing Sera’s scream, began screaming also, and their father shouted from the living room, “What, goddamn it! What is it now!” but he didn’t get up from his chair. They fled from the dining room and took refuge on the back porch, their knees touching when they sat down together on the damp brick steps.

Sera thought all the time about her three month stay in Cambodia. She could feel the memories of it around her, the earth and the jungle, the ancient stones of Angkor Wat, the cascading tree roots that were starting to consume it. She often found herself in Phnom Penh again, her arms still holding the torso of the man she’d gone there to be with. She bounced along on a whining moped, packed in with the cars and rickshaws and bicycles at rush hour, and they were swerving through the intersections, whirring in circles around the Independence Monument until she was dizzy, and she was closing her

eyes, pressing her nose into the space between his shoulder blades, cotton and sweat and engine oil.

It wasn't like that the whole time. As the days passed, she'd started thinking about Barbara, at home with Jack, trying for a baby with no luck. Sera didn't feel much warmth for Jack, but there was no obvious reason to dislike him. Jack himself seemed like a pane of glass, visible only by the way the world around him behaved. In Sera's head, Jack seemed like an entirely different species from the man she had followed overseas, a man who was as solid and self-contained as the earth itself, a cauldron of original wisdoms and feelings, but still, somehow, lacking insight and practical sense. In the bedroom they shared in Siem Reap, he ran his hands along her back. Her quiet anxiety concerned him. "Why are you so far away from me?" he asked her. He had no siblings. He didn't seem to understand why she would feel the desire to go back home.

When Sera left, her man stayed in Cambodia.

Now, on their father's porch, Sera brought herself back to the States again. Back to her sister. To Barbara folding herself down until her head rested on her knees. The wind pulled at their clothes. Overhead, the clouds broke apart, yellow and fleshy in color, scattered across the sky like a rash.

"We need to get rid of these ants for him," Barbara said. "He needs an exterminator to do a clean sweep of the house."

"Alan should have done something about it," Sera said.

“Well, he obviously didn’t. Now they’re in there, building their little homes in the insulation.” Barbara’s breath came short when she saw a smile creeping onto Sera’s face, the image of ants in little houses popping up. “You think this is funny?”

Sera’s smile fell. “No.”

“It’s not funny that our father has ants in his walls. He’s our father.”

“It was a little funny,” Sera said, “when we both started screaming in there.”

When Barbara had no response to this, Sera added, “I’m just wondering why Alan didn’t do something about it sooner.”

“Well,” Barbara said, folding her arms. “You’ve seen *his* house.”

“His house isn’t that bad.”

“Only because he has a wife, Sera. It’s the woman that makes all the difference. We keep our houses clean. Everything is cleaner when one of us is around. And you know that, Sera. Don’t argue with me.”

Sera didn’t argue. She didn’t like arguing.

“What—” Barbara clasped her hands together. “All right. What do you want to do now?”

“I’d like to go home. Call Beth back here, and forget this whole thing. I hate being in this house when no one else is here.”

“That,” Barbara said, “is not going to happen. No. We’ve planned this and we’ve come this far and to quit now we’d just be—” she searched for the right word, “whiners.”

Though maybe that wasn’t the right word. Sera, who was better at knowing what to say, would sometimes fill in the term that Barbara searched for, but this time she

missed it. She was thinking hard about what she could say so that they could both go home. And Barbara knew this, and Barbara wanted to go home also. The house was a tomb to them, and the person living inside of it expressed no joy at seeing them. Now, surely now, when he was most vulnerable and feeble, he could see what they were trying to do for him.

“I think,” Sera said, but she couldn’t say what she thought. The words got all tangled up with Barbara looking at her expectantly. What do you want to do now? “I think we should go ahead and have the party without Alan,” she said.

Barbara’s mouth twisted. “Really?”

“I think that when Alan says he’ll be late, he’ll be really, really late. It’s a pattern with him. We both know this. If they get here, they can have the food and the cake that we don’t eat.”

Barbara nodded. “That’s sounds fair. Yes. It sounds like a good idea. We’ll eat and have cake, and they’ll get here when they get here.”

“It’s fair,” Sera said. “That’s what we’ll do.”

The wind was dying, the final breaths of a storm making its way back out to the sea. The backyard was shaded, but overhead an airplane glinted, catching sunlight. Barbara saw it. She had never flown before, not really, though she took solace in knowing that she had a memory, which Sera did not have, because Sera was younger. Barbara had talked about it, the time she and their father were in the backyard. He grabbed her under the armpits and held her up, told her to hold her arms out like wings. A wind blast. A needle from the loblolly pine falling into her hair. A laugh. Their mother’s? “It’s a real

memory,” Barbara said. “He’s a good man. He did his best.” But Sera, some years ago, sorting through her sister’s old things in the attic of their father’s house, found a page marked in a children’s book, a pastel drawing that depicted the scene in Barbara’s memory down to the pine needle in the little girl’s hair.

Sera took a drive to the hardware store and came back with a can of ant killer. She sprayed it into the hole in the wall, but the chemical smell overwhelmed them. They lit pine candles and opened all the windows on the first floor.

“Well,” Sera said. “If any of them are alive, at least they’re not happy about the smell.”

They hung the lanterns up together, strung them from nail to nail, with light bulbs in them; when Barbara plugged them in, they gave the entire dining room a saintly, pinkish glow. And their light, glimmering through the teardrops of the chandelier, pleased both sisters, as though they had done something the only way they could have done it, and had done it perfectly.

Barbara took the roast out. It looked all right. An edible roast. She put it in a blue and white porcelain dish on the center of the table with sliced carrots in a curry sauce, which Sera had cooked. Now, Sera went into the living room and got their father, led him in and sat him down at the table. “Looks like Christmas in here,” he said, which made Barbara and Sera both laugh and grip each other’s hands. When they ate, they did so in silence, the sisters watching their father, his slow nod as he remembered the flavor of the roast from a long time ago and accepted it as good.

At the end of the meal, when Alan hadn't showed, Barbara brought in the cake, alight with a single candle, and set it down in front of their father. They sang. Their voices echoed in the room.

"Make a wish, Dad," Barbara said.

"A let's eat the whole thing," Sera said. "All three of us. It'll serve Alan right to get nothing."

They laughed. And their father stared into the blue-yellow flame and his lips parted, and for a moment, it was as though he'd forgotten what you were supposed to do with candles. His daughters sat in a chair to either side of him, their faces pressing in on his with a strange longing, childlike, even though they were grown. The younger let her smile fall, her cheeks aching, and the older sat clenching the edge of the table, wanting from him, but he had gone elsewhere. A foreign market that assaulted his head with scents, frying oil and smoke and the blood of slaughtered animals, the photograph of a woman in the back pocket of his uniform. The infantrymen poured soju into shot glasses, laughing, kicking dust off of their boots. His fingertips rubbed the photograph's edges until they were soft. And a woman waited at home, in wooden beads and sandals. A woman walking through the back garden with her eyes closed, feeling the leaves under her fingertips.